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CHRISTINE BROWNLEE'S ORDEAL

VOL. II.



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CHRISTINE BROWNLEE'S ORDEAL

BY

MARY PATRICK

AUTHOR OF 'MARJORIE BRUCE'S LOVE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.



LONDON

SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

1878

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CHRISTINE BROWNLEE'S ORDEAL.

CHAPTER XII.

TWO VISITORS TO BOGHALL.

'I WISH I was a man,' sighed Christine, uplifting a serious pair of pleading grey eyes to her brother Hugh, by whose side she was pacing one of the secluded garden walks a couple of days after the incidents of which I have spoken in my last chapter.

'Why?' questioned he, removing his cigar from his lips and looking down at her with a kindly smile—poor Chrissy was pale and unnaturally quiet this pleasant autumn morning, he noticed.

'That I might ride over to Boghall,' she said, with another sigh and beseeching glance

'Ride over, broken arm and all! I wonder how you'd manage that feat!'

'Well, go over *anyhow*, I shouldn't care how. I forgot all about my arm, of course. I've other things to think of now-a-days.'

'Tut,' said the captain jestingly, 'if you were a man Will wouldn't care to see you.'

Then Christine brought out the speech she had been longing to make ever since she rose that morning—it was about noon now.

'Ah, dear Hugh,' she said eagerly, 'do go and see Will. I can't bear to think of him all alone, ill and unhappy in that great, dull house.'

Captain Brownlee shrugged his shoulders.

'Go and see him yourself, Christine. What good could *I* do? It is *you* he wants and can't get.'

He knew very well that he was bidding her do an impossibility.

Christine turned impatiently away, a frown on her pretty face.

'I wish I dared,' she exclaimed; 'but

you know very well that I cannot do anything but wait dully here thinking and thinking of him till my head aches.'

'Supposing I go, what am I to say or do? It is a very disagreeable business to face him just after you have sent him away as you did,' grumbled the soldier, by no means relishing the idea, though he was heartily sorry for his cousin.

The young lady wheeled round in an instant vastly relieved and grateful. 'Thank you, dear Hugh,' she said with a caressing pat of his broad back. 'You are always good to me. What in the world should I do without my big brother?'

'Be driven to seek consolation and sympathy in the arms of a big husband. I don't doubt you've a prospective one in your mind's eye,' laughed Hugh, pleased by her thankfulness. But Christine was in no mood for banter; her thoughts for the last two days had been only of her poor cousin shut up at Boghall with his own dreary musings;

she felt very certain that he would not seek distraction in outside society.

As, lunch over, Hugh was setting off she slipped a note into his hand.

‘Give it to Will,’ she whispered as he looked at her in a little surprise. ‘I felt that I must say a word to him. Can’t you understand, Hugh?——’ Tears stopped her from saying more, and she moved swiftly into the house, leaving her brother to take his place in the gig and be driven off, revolving in his mind the late doings of the young lady, until he came to the conclusion that they could only be accounted for by a serious attachment to Dr. Erskine. She had come pretty near marrying Will out of sheer pity and cousinly affection, with possibly an unrecognised alloy of less worthy sentiments. Christine would not be Christine without her ambition of prominent place and power. Nor was Hugh mistaken in his suppositions.

Another besides his fair cousin had taken

pity on Will's solitary state that morning, Sir Robert Urquhart, who had become a pretty frequent visitor.

The two men were sitting together in the verandah which ran along the front of the house when the Southfield gig drew up at the hall door, and as Hugh stepped down he found a couple of outstretched hands awaiting his.

'Delighted to see you, Captain Brownlee,' Sir Robert declared with his most amiable smile as he shook hands.

Will Urquhart said nothing just at the first moment, only lifted his eyes in a glance that thanked him for this visit, then with a significant grip of his offered hand turned away to give directions to the groom who had come round from the stables.

Hugh perceived that this last couple of days had told hardly on him. He looked wretchedly ill and depressed. In his concern for him he could not find a word to say to Sir Robert, whose sharp eyes did not fail

to notice the unusual demeanour of the young men, and to connect it with the change he had previously remarked in the master of Boghall. Sir Robert, apparently wrapt in the enjoyment of a choice Havannah, whose smoking he had resumed, listened sharply when, the vehicle sent away, they sat down beside him on the verandah. They did not say much certainly, but to a close observer like this gentleman there was ample matter for future consideration in their embarrassed little talk.

‘Well,’ remarked Captain Brownlee, carefully avoiding to look at his cousin—he was busy filling his meerschaum in a scientific manner, and having but one capable hand might be excused for seeming to concentrate all his faculties on the operation, ‘I suppose you got home all right?’

His companion nodded and made a fidgety movement in his seat, not caring to revive a remembrance of that dismal drive.

‘How’s my aunt?’ he asked abruptly, making an effort to get into a safe subject.

‘Pretty well, thank you ; got a bit of headache, but that’s chronic, you know,’ and Hugh glanced up with a forced smile. He was not given to laughing at his mother’s often fanciful ailments, but at the moment he was willing to be facetious on any pretext.

‘It seems an arrangement of nature that all ladies should have headaches,’ commented Sir Robert, removing his cigar to utter this remark, and so do his little share of the dragging conversation. It was a very harmless sentence, and very blandly proffered, but Hugh was unreasonable enough to take inward umbrage at it, as at an insult to woman-kind in general. It is astonishing how our own sentiments towards a speaker can infuse with meaning, of a good or bad nature, the simplest of his utterances, and Hugh heartily disliked Sir Robert.

‘I have had little experience of feminine

peculiarities,' he responded drily, without looking up from his pipe-filling; and Sir Robert, though he laughed and made a jesting retort of disbelief in this statement, inly set down another item to the already long score of injuries received at the hands of the Brownlee family, to be avenged when opportunity offered.

'What's your father about? Business, as usual? I hope he's well,' the young host proceeded to demand in a jerky and constrainedly polite way, very unusual to him, and, his queries responded to in much the same strain by his equally embarrassed cousin, he enquired after the welfare of no more of the family, an overlook which struck Sir Robert as specially worthy of remark. Seeing that he was unlikely to pick up any more casual family news—for a silence had set in, and Captain Brownlee was now puffing away in seeming abstraction, while Mr. Urquhart sat staring straight before him, absently patting the head of a pet greyhound couched at

his feet—the wily gentleman threw out a feeler.

‘How is Miss Brownlee?’ he asked with his gravest and most irreproachable air, turning round upon that young lady’s brother, but stealthily watching her reputed admirer.

‘Very well, thanks: at least her arm is going on well enough; bones don’t mend in a day or two,’ was Hugh’s response, in itself far from interesting, but bringing as it did a hasty flush to Will Urquhart’s thin cheek, and making him wince perceptibly, it was highly appreciated by Sir Robert.

‘I am very happy to hear that no worse consequences have attended her accident. These things turn out so badly sometimes,’ remarked the baronet, with a polite air of relieved concern, but neither of the young men heard what he said. Their eyes had chanced to meet, and by a glance and a gesture Hugh had contrived to intimate to his cousin a wish to speak with him in private.

'By-the-by, Hugh,' the young host said with suspicious abruptness, 'there's a book I want to show you—come to the library a minute. You'll excuse us, Sir Robert—we'll be with you directly.'

'All right, my dear boy ; if you begin to stand on ceremony with me I'll make off, I assure you,' spoke the gentleman thus appealed to, and nothing could have been franker and more engagingly amiable than the air with which he regarded his relative and the caressing way he lightly patted his arm as he passed by him towards the house.

Truth obliges me to own that the baronet's face assumed a sinister and sneering expression the moment he was left alone, and that a very ugly oath was muttered by the same lips which had been speaking so blandly and smiling in so winning a manner.

'It is only a little note from Christine,' spoke Hugh. 'She ran out with it at the last moment as I was setting off. She'd have liked to come along with me, poor Queenie,'

and the gallant soldier's voice trembled a little, though he tried to laugh.

'Give it to me,' half whispered Will Urquhart, stretching out a pathetically eager hand.

They were in the library by this time, the doors shut and privacy secured. The hunger in his cousin's voice and look awed Hugh. He put the coveted treasure in his hand, then, as quite oblivious of everything else he sat down at the table with it, Hugh went quietly away into an inner room—the study, silently closing the door between them.

'Christine will never find a truer lover than poor Will,' he murmured as he mechanically lifted a book. His eyes were misty, and when he sought to read the title the type swam confusedly before them.

Meanwhile Will Urquhart was devouring in trembling eagerness every word of the precious missive. They were not many, and they were very simple, but they meant much, very much, to him, after these last two days

and nights of craving for a word with her, a glimpse of her.

‘Dear friend and cousin,’ wrote Christine, in characters that lacked their wonted firmness, ‘I cannot let Hugh go without saying something of what is in my heart, so I send you this foolish note. I am always thinking of you, always longing to do some little thing to comfort you. Yet it is not any use. Only I pray God to bless you and give you faith in Him, and in the fond affection of her who has unwillingly given you so much pain in return for all your unfailing goodness. Come soon to see us, and let me know that you have forgiven your ever-loving cousin, Christine.’

The young man’s was a very gentle nature, and this sweet pity was as a soothing balm to his sore heart. Over the tremulous lines the girl’s loved little hand had traced there dropped a few quiet tears, bringing to him unutterable relief.

The gloomy mists of distrust and despair amid which his sick soul had been blindly

staggering began to lift, revealing once more the fair blue heavens where a merciful God dwelt, the grand mountain peaks of human achievement, up whose steep sides, unnoticed, it may be, by the mass of mankind, are ever climbing earnest aspirants to spiritual completeness. Christine had been praying for him—gay, unthinking Christine of the other day, which seemed as far back as if it had belonged to a previous existence. He would also pray for himself—pray for patience, faith in God and man, strength to carry without one murmur the heavy burden destiny had imposed; at least the way could not be very long—closer and closer, day by day, was he drawing to the mysterious shadows of the deep death-valley.

Already he recognised himself as a doomed man, and marvelled how he had so long been cheated by delusive hopes of recovery. The doctors, with their wonted wise unwillingness to pronounce a decisive death-sentence, had indeed spoken a few words of vague hope

and cheer, but using the light of his own experience in other similar cases, thinking over his own symptoms even in this present lull of the terrible disease, he knew how little value must be attached to such well-meant speeches.

Christine's father had tempted him in a moment of weakness, or surely, in spite of his previous longings to speak out his love, he would not have been selfish enough to attempt overshadowing her sunny existence by associating it with his own in a tie so close as that of marriage.

Will Urquhart was far from being suspicious by nature, but he could not fail to see that the old man had been prompted by sheer covetousness of material advantages for Christine. She herself had proved to them all that she was above such base calculations, and he vowed there and then to make such provision for her in his will as he would have made supposing she had given herself to him as his wife.

There was some comfort in that idea. The day would assuredly come when his darling would know he had loved her unselfishly at the bottom of his heart ; and if his poor worldly wealth could help to make her life-path smoother, he would not have possessed it altogether in vain.

Certainly these two souls, which had long failed to comprehend each other fully, misled by the disguises of conventional intercourse, were now being led to an ennobling recognition by this sudden disturbance of their everyday life.

Whilst thus nerved by the courageous impulse Christine's tender thoughtfulness for him had created, her cousin drew writing materials towards him, and hastily penned a few manly, yet pathetically fond lines, which Christine, by-and-by, read with no little emotion.

The reader will guess their purport. Making no allusion to his own suffering, he assured her of his sense of her goodness,

entreating her to let his mistake be forgotten between them, and to look on him thenceforth only as her faithful friend and cousin, to whom her happiness was the dearest aim remaining to him in life.

Sir Robert Urquhart was strolling about the lawn in front of the house when the two young men reappeared. He received Mr. Urquhart's apology for his pretty long absence with an air of thorough good humour, assured him that in the company of a good cigar he was ever quite contented, and took pains to draw Captain Brownlee into civil, if not friendly talk. Inwardly the baronet was vexing his soul with conjectures as to the cause of their host's perceptible improvement in spirits, an improvement which was speedily reflected in the person of Hugh Brownlee. None of this disquietude was, however, permitted to appear during the remainder of the afternoon passed by the three gentlemen in walking about the couple of properties, which, as I have said, adjoined each other.

Sir Robert did not return to his own home without having found yet other matter for future cogitation in his solitary hours.

Dinner was over and they were sitting together in the library, which was Mr. Urquhart's wonted reception-room. Coffee had been brought in, and over it a sufficiently lively, political discussion was going on; having persuaded his guests to stay to dinner, their host had not failed to lay aside all sign of inward discomposure, so, as was usually the case when Sir Robert dropped in intent upon exercising his far from contemptible intelligence for his young relative's distraction, the time passed without dragging. Just as Hugh, who never relished the baronet's society, was on the point of preparing his cousin for his departure, the hour becoming late, a telegram was put into the hands of the latter.

There fell the usual silence, which seems the natural accompaniment to the reading of these nerve-upsetting, modern inventions.

Will Urquhart's face clouded over ominously, and the other two gentlemen were not surprised when, looking up from the perusal of the message, he announced the receipt of bad news.

'The telegram is sent by Mr. Forgan,' he said, naming his lawyer who was then in London, 'so it's sure to be correct. That Spanish mining company your father had such faith in has smashed up,' and he looked across to Hugh in evident oblivion of the presence of a third party.

'And you've lost heavily?' enquired that gentleman with equal unbusiness-like imprudence. Poor Hugh's hopeless inaptitude in money matters was a gentlemanly failing of which his father was secretly proud.

Mr. Urquhart shrugged his shoulders and forced a smile.

'Pretty smartly, but never mind me. I'm sorry to know that we're in the same boat. At least your father is, and that's much the same thing.'

The speaker was also devoid of that caution in discussing pecuniary affairs, which is inborn with some mortals, and by others is only acquired in a course of counting-house experience.

Sir Robert Urquhart's voice broke the momentary silence, and, smoothly as its tones fell, they startled Hugh Brownlee into a sense of his own and his cousin's stupidity in thus, on the impulse of the moment, proclaiming his father's losses. He was asking for details of the mining company, a sympathetic concern in his air, and into these Mr. Urquhart entered to the extent of his very limited ability ; the fact was that in this and in most of his other investments of late years he had been blindly led by Mr. Brownlee, who until very recently had been uncommonly fortunate in his ventures of the kind.

Annoyed at his father's share in bringing about this loss to Will, and concerned at the loss itself, which he found to amount to some four thousand pounds, Hugh was

anxious to reach home and hear whether they themselves were deeply involved. He was not in the habit of discussing questions of gain or loss with his father, who, greatly to his children's satisfaction, was wont to resent any curiosity as to his private pecuniary affairs; but he did not doubt that he would be informed of this particular calamity seeing that Will also was concerned in it.

As, the gig having been brought to the hall door, the two young men stood exchanging a private word or two on the threshold, the note from Christine was produced and silently thrust by Hugh into his breast pocket. And then as they grasped each other's hands for a good-by shake, Will Urquhart's voice said, in a trembling hurry which told of his deep emotion,

'My stupid note says not a tithe of what I wanted to say, Hugh. Try to tell her how I thank her. Don't let her fret herself about me. Say I am well, and so on, you know what I mean, old fellow,' and then

a pathetic attempt at a laugh concluded the stammering speech, which went to his friend's heart as no display of studied eloquence would have done.

'All right, Will, you're a dear old *brick*,' was the whole Hugh could force out, and these few and inelegant words were spoken in a half-inaudible whisper; but a mutual glance and a hard hand-grip told in true Scotch fashion the tender emotions swelling in their hearts at that parting moment.

'And I'll be in to see you all very soon, Hugh,' was the last speech called out from the doorway as the gig was driving off, a most welcome bit of news to the whole of the Brownlee family, Christine included.

After all Hugh heard very little from his father's lips relative to the mining smash-up. Mr. Brownlee crossly pooh-poohed the subject, and talked in a comfortably contemptuous tone of 'trifling losses.' His son was very well satisfied to remain in ignorance of unpleasant details; and, as Will Urquhart

also made light of his concern in the matter, it was speedily dropped as a disagreeable bit of office business, unsuitable for mention within the luxurious sanctity of the home circle, hitherto strictly guarded from all vulgar money cares.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RIDE TO BE REMEMBERED.

As, after his chance *rencontre* with Mr. Brownlee on the threshold of Woodend, Dr. Erskine took his homeward way he fell to thinking seriously over the necessity of his coming to a clear understanding with Christine. Either her father must look upon him as an interloper seeking in a dishonourable way to steal away her affections, or he must regard him as a lover on the point of making a formal petition for her hand, and naturally he would expect that his own views in the matter should be consulted.

Mr. Brownlee's manner for a long time back had decidedly not been such as the most self-conceited wooer could find encouraging, and the young doctor felt very

certain that an offer of marriage conveyed through the orthodox paternal channel would be met by a decided repulse. Now it did not seem to him that duty required him to confront any such ordeal, in the first instance at least. All he felt bound to do was to tell the state of the case frankly to Christine herself, and if she listened to him favourably, to make his next step an application for her father's sanction to their engagement.

As to the young lady's sentiments towards him he was in uncomfortable perplexity. Sometimes she seemed anxious to guard their intercourse from all admixture of a warmer feeling than mere pleasant friendliness, sometimes it appeared to him that the strange new-born quietude of her manner towards him on other occasions could only be accounted for by the supposition that he had won her love.

He was fully determined to learn the truth from her own lips on the first occasion when he found a private opportunity of

questioning her ; meanwhile, unwilling to force himself into Mr. Brownlee's house against his wishes, and sure that Christine perfectly understood his feelings towards her, he denied himself the delight of visiting Woodend for a whole fortnight ; and a terribly long fortnight he found it, even though he crowded it with work requiring his close attention.

September having set in, Captain Brownlee, whose arm was at length released from its sling, was, in company with Mr. Grahame and the shooting guests who had come to Midforrest, bestowing much of his time on the grouse which abounded on the moors within easy driving distance of Langtoun.

Christine, seeing but little of her brother and nothing of her friend the young doctor, found life at home decidedly unsatisfying, and inwardly felt a good deal hurt by this temporary desertion. Her music, her painting, her needlework, had all of necessity been put aside since the disastrous day of the

Avon Glen picnic, and she discovered to her great self-disgust that she had grown too restless to enjoy reading as she had been wont to do.

Instinctively she knew that a crisis of her life was approaching, and vain were her attempts to shut her eyes to the fact and placidly occupy herself with everyday concerns.

Captain Brownlee looked up his friend the doctor one afternoon ; finding him alone with his books in his little library, looking pale and overworked, he stayed half-an-hour with him in friendly talk, and ere his call was over he had persuaded him to take a holiday on the morrow and accompany him on a fishing expedition—the only sort of field-sport his student friend favoured.

The Avon was an excellent trout stream, there had been a couple of days of rather showery weather, and they had reason to expect a triumphal return with well-filled baskets.

So they assured Christine when, having gone out together along the High Street, they found her sitting in her pony-carriage in front of old Hodge the draper's, a few doors beyond the doctor's house. She had promised to wait there if she had accomplished her shopping before her brother rejoined her.

The young lady was pleased to be in a bright and smiling mood that afternoon, and deigned to show a flattering interest in the plans propounded to her, so much so, indeed, that it flashed upon Hugh's mind she was probably fishing for an invitation to join in the excursion ; many a time before, in earlier years, had she been his comrade on like occasions—and a gay and enlivening comrade too.

'Why shouldn't we ask her to come, Dr. Erskine?' he said, nonchalantly, as he stepped into the driving-seat beside her and gathered up the reins, while the doctor stood on the pavement by the side of the carriage, bending down to catch a low-spoken jesting

enquiry as to the cause of his desertion of Woodend. Decidedly his attitude was lover-like, the High Street folks thought.

Christine laughed, and looked archly from beneath her half-dropped eyelids at the gentleman thus addressed.

'Why not, indeed?' echoed he, his handsome dark face lighted up with a smile of unmistakeable pleasure at the idea, and his eyes seeking Christine's, and though affecting to grumble at the *brusquerie* of their mutual invitation, she accepted it all the same, her pulses, to tell the truth, beginning to beat fast with glad excitement, and her fair face reflecting the inner radiance of the moment.

'What will your father say, Miss Brownlee? I forgot to think of that,' Hugh remarks, with a laugh, as they drive off, the doctor following them with his eyes until they are hidden by the interposition of another vehicle, then going home with an elastic step and a delightful glow about the region of his heart. Had not Christine smiled upon him

out of those wondrously changeful grey eyes, whose depths he had never yet fathomed? Would not the morrow bring the long-desired quiet opportunity of asking her to be his wife? Did not her manner to-day give him confidence that she would not answer in the negative? What more blessed inner sunshine could the young man want, after all the deprivations of this dull, colourless fortnight?

‘What will your father say, eh, Queenie?’ repeats Hugh, discovering, with surprise, that his usually wide-awake sister is in a state of abstraction and has not heard his first jesting query. Then the young lady comes out of cloudland, with a grave little smile still hovering about the corners of her pretty mouth, and a soft light in her expressive eyes.

‘Nothing very agreeable, I dare say, but I don’t greatly care. I am doing nothing wrong in merely going off on a fishing excursion, with you to take care of me.’

'I begin to dread the responsibility, Miss Brownlee. I wish you would stay at home.'

'No, thank you, my dear Hugh. After all, I am very well able to take care of myself. Papa and you may safely concern yourselves less with my affairs.'

'Your affairs, indeed! What a business sound that has!' laughed Hugh. 'I suppose *your* affairs are of the matrimonial order, though, and you can't conduct them singly. What if Dr. Erskine intends to lend you a hand in arranging them to-morrow?'

Whereupon Christine frowns and colours hotly, turning aside from her brother with an impatient air and disdaining to reply.

There is a little silence after he has made a jesting apology for his presumption. Hugh who has been dividing his attention between his seemingly offended sister and the ponies, to-day in their friskiest spirits, presently speaks.

'Joking apart,' he says, yet with an admixture of raillery in his gravity of air, 'I

want to know what the doctor and you are driving at. I hope you know yourselves. It strikes me that you've gone a-head rarely of late, and I can't help wondering how it's all to end.'

'You are free to go on wondering as much as you like,' Christine answers crossly, with a shrug; 'I cannot prevent you tormenting yourself with foolish fancies.'

Hugh looks at her gravely, and says in a tone of distrust and warning, 'Dr. Erskine is not a man to play fast and loose with, Christine, remember that.'

He would say more, but Christine breaks in satirically,

'He is a man who is very well able to look after himself without your help, my poor Hugh, and as for me, I am not given to playing fast and loose with him or anybody else. When I am in want of a father confessor I may come to you for absolution and advice. Meanwhile you will do well to leave me alone.'

Evidently Miss Brownlee is not prepared to yield up any interesting confidences ; and her brother, shaking his head in a baffled manner, takes to silence likewise ; his thoughts insensibly reverting to a fair lady of quite another type, of whom he has lately been seeing too much for his own good.

Lady Jean Grahame has imperceptibly come to regarding him as her special cavalier. She has others now that the house is pretty well filled with guests, but none of them understand her wishes, as if by intuition, and obey them with such quiet devotion as does this gentleman, who has besides an incontestable claim upon her affectionate regard in the fact that he is her husband's most trusted friend. He is one of the least exacting and most sympathetic of companions, too. Her ladyship, inclined to like him from the very first day he was introduced to her by Mr. Grahame, has finished by being aware of a decided blank in her happiness when Captain Brownlee's bronzed,

moustached face, with its grave, lazily-thoughtful eyes, is not to be seen among the array of her guests.

Just now her hands are too full to allow of her bestowing much attention upon the matrimonial scheme she had formed for his benefit and Antoinette Kirkwood's. It strikes her, too, that the soldier is blameably lukewarm in the cause, and she is indulgent enough to let it rest in abeyance for the present, greatly to the satisfaction of the gentleman concerned.

Christine's voice of recovered good-humour brings back her brother from the Midforrest drawing-room, where in spirit he has been hanging about fair and merry Lady Jean, drinking in the witchery of her smiling glances.

'I've just been thinking, Hugh,' she says coaxingly, regarding him, 'that I can surely go off for a few hours' fishing with you, without our entering into all sorts of insignificant

details to papa. Mamma is quite different, I don't object to telling *her*.'

'I suppose Dr. Erskine is the only insignificant detail you can be referring to,' drolly comments her companion, staring hard at her. They both laugh ; and Christine knows that she will find ready co-operation in keeping the doctor's part of the morrow's programme a secret from the paternal ears.

It has been previously arranged that Hugh is to drive her in the pony carriage, and that the doctor is to ride, meeting them outside the town boundary, about the Midforrest entrance-gates.

'Papa will not trouble himself to enquire minutely into our plans,' Hugh is assured by Christine, when he professes a dread of cross-questioning on the matter ; 'he is growing more and more engrossed with his money-making day by day, and takes less and less interest in what we two idlers are about.'

A shadow of doubt flits over her brother's face.

‘Is it merely money-making that troubles him and makes him look so worried to death at times? Sometimes I think it must be money-*losing*, Christine. He has taken so much in hand, and times are so bad, everybody is talking of business losses now-a-days.’

‘Hush, Hugh,’ says the girl, looking imperturbably gay, ‘don’t talk horrors you don’t understand. Why, papa hasn’t been refusing you money lately, has he?’

‘No, certainly not, quite the reverse; he is rather always pressing money upon me,’ Hugh confesses, looking re-assured, and their drive ends without further talk bearing upon the interests of my story.

The three friends met at the appointed *rendezvous* about nine o’clock the following morning. The weather was delightful; a touch of frost in the air, giving it that inspiring autumn freshness which makes young blood tingle pleasantly, bringing colour to the cheek and brightness to the eyes.

Their way lay along a broad and well-kept highroad, bordered with magnificent old elm-trees for a considerable distance after leaving Langtoun. The sun still low in the horizon glinted through the branches lighting up the yellow and russet leaves into strange glory. The wind came in joyous rushes, ever and anon as it swept by sending a shower of falling foliage through the air. Hither and thither bound for the harvest fields which glittered golden-hued in the sunlight, flew cawing rooks cleaving the blue, cloud-specked sky with their sombre flapping wings; robins sang cheerily as they hopped from twig to twig; the very sparrows rising in chirping, fluttering commotion from between the horses' feet, added to the general cheeriness of the scene, enlivened also by the usual stir of human life, vehicles of many varieties successively appearing on this frequented highroad.

'I feel like an escaped school-boy, with a whole day to play truant in,' Christine

told Dr. Erskine, with a glance of charming *bonne camaraderie*, as he rode on by the side of the little carriage where she was seated, looking even lovelier than was her wont, the bewitched young man thought. Indeed, Miss Brownlee had bestowed especial pains on her toilette that morning, and simple as it was, each little detail was calculated to enhance her rare natural attractions.

The gentleman thus addressed found it in his heart to wish that she felt like some being of less hopelessly unsentimental an order, yet he could not but laugh and respond with sympathetic gaiety, her amused brother chiming in in the same strain. Hugh was vastly pleased to see her resume her old light-hearted air, and show an inclination for banter and merriment: ever since her accident, and more especially since their cousin Will's disturbing proposal, he had remarked an unnatural gravity in her habitual demeanour, and this change had struck him as

ominous of coming troubles, sure to alter entirely the tenor of the girl's hitherto careless existence. His fair sister must fulfil the usual woman's lot, he supposed—she must love and marry and carry away the sunshine of her presence from the home of her glad youth as the rest of her kind are wont to do—but all the same he was in no hurry to see such changes, and there was blessed reassurance in her laughing mood of that morning.

If he had known that the high spirits which made their drive such a pleasant one were chiefly prompted by excitement of rather a feverish nature, he would not have thus congratulated himself.

Queen Christine, in fact, had an instinctive presentiment that her independent and dignified maiden reign was drawing very near a close, and in the tumult of conflicting emotions, which kept her heart beating very fast, and her nerves thrilling strangely, a species of proud, though gay defiance, of her

love-craving, love-prompting, womanly impulses had, for the time being, seized the supremacy.

By degrees as Gordon Erskine rode on, drinking in healthful exhilaration from the crisp autumn air, the brisk movement through a fair landscape of fertile, level country, the sight of that lovely young face framed in its glory of rippled, ruddy brown hair, and bright with arch vivacity of expression, he, too, became possessed by a spirit of excitement, a strong, glad, fearless spirit, which bore up his heart like a life-giving elixir.

The woman he loved was beside him, the world was 'very good,' as on the morning after its creation; that day he would enter upon his kingdom and begin to enjoy these long-deferred, priceless delights he had sternly denied himself until now. Not a doubt of Christine, not a shadowy fear of the future arose to trouble him; he had been many and many a time haunted by such terrifying phantoms, but during this blessed ride they

came not nigh him. He felt as if he dreaded nothing in the universe.

'I have had a ride to be remembered all my life,' he told Christine, with a glad ring in his voice and a strange glow in his smiling eyes as, their journey over and the horses put up at a little roadside inn, they took their way on foot through a field of newly-cut barley towards the river. For once that young lady found herself without a word to answer, and so responded only by a blush and a smiling glance, which served the purpose remarkably well.

'I am going to have a day which I shall remember all mine,' she said within herself, and her heart took to beating with yet more alarming velocity; then unsuspecting Hugh called out some trivial remark from behind *à propos* of the supposed object of the excursion, and the doctor and she did their best to appear interested—succeeding very tolerably in this hypocritical undertaking.

How often in after years did they find

themselves again in memory walking on between the yellow swathes of grain intermingled with faded flowers, the river lying before them gleaming in the sunshine which fell lovingly over all the quiet landscape ; across a hedge another harvest-field, where reapers were at work plying their shining sickles, while buxom, sun-browned damsels in short dark petticoats and pink *short-gowns* laughed and jested with them cheerily as they raked and bound the golden barley.

Yet the way was but short ; in ten minutes or so the trio were at the brink of the water on the look-out for a favourable spot to commence operations. Such was found after a good deal of marching and counter-marching, ordered by Captain Brownlee, who, rather to his surprise, perceived that his friend the doctor was in a rare pensive mood at this stage of the day's proceedings.

He was not long left to puzzle over this phenomenon, for just as he was fairly

settled to work, seated on a log that jutted out into the stream, while Christine sauntered about the grassy meadow skirting the Avon at this part of its course, a disturbing voice sounded behind him, and looking round he saw that gentleman, whom he had believed engrossed with his line, a bit farther down the bank.

‘The fact is, I can’t give my mind to the trout just yet, Captain Brownlee—there’s something I want to talk to you about first,’ he began, with a shade of perturbation in his manly, self-possessed tones, although his eyes were smiling as if he wanted to appear quite at his ease.

‘Ah!’ sighed the soldier pathetically; ‘you’ve frightened away a fish; I’m certain I felt a nibble just as you spoke. However, it can’t be helped. Sit down and talk away as much as you like;’ and he pointed with a good-humoured if not very happy smile to the big log on which he was sitting, at the same time jerking his line out of the water.

After all, what did he care about trout compared with his sister's fate ? And an irresistible wish to know what the doctor wanted made him utter an abrupt question which greatly helped that gentleman in his endeavours to screw himself up to the pitch of making a clean breast of it to Christine's brother.

‘ I suppose it's got to do with Christine ? ’

That comfortably direct appeal speedily brought about a confession to which the soldier listened with more sympathy than most men would have shown under the same circumstances ; saying but little, indeed, yet by his quiet glances giving his companion the conviction that in him he would find a friendly supporter if Christine herself favoured the suit.

Indeed Hugh had no objection whatever to Dr. Erskine as a brother-in-law, the higher powers being agreeable to this arrangement. He thought him a remarkably fine fellow, more suited to marry with fair Christine.

than any man he had yet come across, provided always that he had been a good deal richer, and had held some higher position than that of doctor in a place like Langtoun.

‘Of course, Dr. Erskine, I speak only my own private sentiments,’ he managed to get out after a little, fearing that he had given unwise encouragement; ‘my father may have different views for Christine, or she herself may think——’

The doctor broke in with some warmth—

‘I have a great deal of presumption in proposing that she should share my poor fortunes—quite so. All I ask is an answer from her own lips. After I have that I shall know how to proceed.’

Hugh rose to his feet when they had got to this point and thrust out a friendly hand to his companion, who had all the time he spoke maintained a standing posture opposite to him, his back against a tree.

‘Don’t be offended,’ he said, in a burst of generous, unworldly feeling; ‘a man like you

does any girl in the land an honour when he seeks her as his wife. Find out Christine's own feelings, and if she loves you—why, I feel sure she can bring my father to reason. He can't mean to sell her for mere wealth or position.'

'And if he *did* mean it, I have faith that she would not consent to be sold for any such base bribes,' spoke the doctor, still rather fierily, as he shook the offered hand; which speech received by Hugh with a nod and a smile of concurrence, he calmed down, and, announcing his intention to learn his fate there and then, walked away towards Christine, who was now retracing her steps in their direction.

Then Hugh took up his neglected line once more, and pensively fell a-thinking over what had happened, and what was likely to happen, catching himself looking oftener at these two meeting figures than at the river. Nearer and nearer they drew to each other, nearer and nearer, till at last

they were face to face. Then there was a halt, a parley. Hugh heard it all with the ear of his fancy, and presently Christine's slight, graceful figure was seen to wheel about and move on side by side with that tall, manly one in the direction whence she had come, the two gradually disappearing in the distance.

Was it emblematical, this meeting, this joining, this passing away out of the reach of his vision? Hugh asked himself, with a long-drawn sigh that spoke no little melancholy.

Nobody fully knew how much Christine was to him, how deep and fond a love for her underlay that jesting, bantering demeanour which was their normal one with each other. It was with a very keen pang at his honest heart that he woke up from his fit of dreamy musing and bethought himself of his line once more.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SUCCESSFUL ANGLER.

‘WELL,’ says Queen Christine, with a gay little nod and a smile of bewitching archness, ‘how is it that you are on the loose, Dr. Erskine? Have you filled your basket already?’

The young man’s eyes peruse her fair and merry face with a keen, swift glance of scrutiny which brings a tell-tale glow to her softly-rounded cheek, and makes her glad to look down in spite of her assumed bravado.

‘I have come to meet you, Miss Brownlee,’ he responds in a suspiciously husky tone. ‘Oblige me by walking on with me a little way, I want to speak to you alone, and I have told Captain Brownlee so.’

The couple have met face to face on the narrow footpath leading through the level meadow close by the water's edge, and are now standing engaged in that parley which Hugh is viewing from afar with such a melancholy gaze.

For five or six minutes previously Christine's heart had been beating at an alarmingly rapid rate as she sauntered towards him, occasionally stooping to pick a daisy and add it to the bunch already in her hand. To her that tall, broad-shouldered figure clad in the unprofessional grey tweed, whose first appearance amongst them had painfully electrified the other doctors of Langtoun, meant her Destiny, striding towards her with relentless haste. She would have liked to turn and flee, but pride and the proprieties forbade her to indulge so unladylike an impulse. As it was she met him with the gaily indifferent air, and the jesting question I have recorded above.

'Will you come with me, Miss Brownlee?'

repeats the young doctor yet more huskily, as he observes that there is a good deal of hesitancy in her look.

‘Suppose I do not wish to go?’

Her voice is very low, and her wontedly erect figure droops just a little.

‘Then you have only to say so, once for all,’ speaks Gordon Erskine, flushing crimson over his handsome, dark-complexioned face, and passing a nervously restless hand over his moustached lip and beard.

‘What a bad temper you have,’ remarks Miss Brownlee, with a shrug and a frown; but all the same she wheels about as she has been requested to do.

‘Don’t trifle with me, Christine. Surely I have waited long enough; why will you persist in joking when you see that I am in no mood for it? A man cannot go on trifling in this way half a lifetime or so, and if you never mean to listen seriously to what you know I have to say to you, it would be

an honester and kinder thing to tell me that at once.'

The doctor did not speak or look like himself at that moment. A great re-action of spirits had come upon him he knew not how, and he could not, as he had been wont to do, seek below Christine's assumption of gay levity for her real feelings.

Perhaps the girl liked him all the better out of temper for her sake. Anyhow she condescended to ignore his boldness in addressing her by her Christian name—which indeed had for the second time in his life slipped out unawares—and to look up at him with a soothing glance; these dark grey eyes had many shades of expression at command.

'I have done as you bade me, and given you your own way as usual. What are you so angry about?' she says demurely, adding as they move on together a laughing rebuke, which has the effect of banishing the unwonted gloom from the young man's face,

and making him respond with a thrill of hopeful eagerness in his voice.

‘Now, Dr. Erskine, aren’t you very cruel to spoil the pleasure of my holiday in this way, and at the very beginning of it too? it is not the least like y-

‘You don’t really think I am going to spoil it or you would not say that—is it not so, Miss Brownlee?’

‘I am afraid to contradict you this morning, you are so evidently bent on quarrelling,’ laughs the girl, without raising her dropped eyelids; and Gordon Erskine’s heart gives a great throb of glad excitement, while a smile breaks, slowly at first, then swiftly, out of lips and eyes.

‘How far do you mean to take me?’ Christine asks a moment after, looking up in time to catch that triumphant, joyous glow which has irradiated his countenance.

Then in his turn he laughs, a low-toned but happy laugh, in which there is yet a tremble of tender emotion.

'As far as you will go with me, Christine.'

There is no possibility of mistaking his meaning, and Christine's face is quickly turned aside to hide its tell-tale blushes. Not so quickly, however, but that he has perceived them, and drawn from them yet fuller assurance of her love.

The young man's heart is too full of strong, deep joy to let him speak out in that thrilling moment ; but it relieves itself in a silent caress, which is yet not bold enough to displease proud Christine, in whose bosom a last struggle between conflicting feelings is just then going on.

He only takes her daisy-filled, little gloved hand and draws it within his arm in a protecting, quietly confident fashion all his own. As he does so she glances up, a tremulous play of feeling about her lips, a new soft light in her eyes though she speaks jestingly.

'You had better take my poor daisies : see you are crushing them against your coat-

sleeve. I would say that I am not tired and don't need your arm in the least, only I fear to put you into a bad temper again.'

She might spare herself the effort of making such frivolous, cool speeches now. He knows very well how to value them, and as he relieves her of her simple bouquet, thinking at the moment that these tiny, crimson-tipped white flowerets thus passed from her hand into his are as emblems of the fair coming days she is to bring into his life, he smiles down upon her in a grave and truthful way, which speaks his disbelief in her assumed indifference.

Through the green meadow they move on in a strange, happy silence, the ripple of the water against its pebbly banks, the rustling of the breeze among the yellowing alders and willows separating their path from the Avon, the chirping of the birds and buzz of insect life the only sounds in their ears.

They are quaffing the first delicious

draught of that ecstatic joy which is given but once in a lifetime, which is remembered for evermore.

It is all like a fair, sun-gladdened dream, and in the sweetness of it they feel no need of words for many minutes. But, alas to Christine! there comes before very long a sharp, wakening pain of remembrance, bringing her back with a long-drawn sigh into the region of the prosaic work-a-day world.

Had not she promised to make no engagement of marriage without her father's consent, and was not she passively permitting Gordon Erskine to believe that she was ready to pledge herself to him? She summoned all her previously spell-bound energies and brought her lover out of paradise by an abrupt request to be taken back to Hugh.

'We are using him very badly, you know,' she adds, trying hard to return to her ordinary voice and manner; and once more her companion scrutinises her fair face keenly, a misgiving arising within his heart.

Upon one point he is resolved, she must hear him out, and tell him in unmistakeable language whether she is willing to be his wife. That she loves him, he is very sure; but can it be that after all she is going to let ambition come between her and him?

‘I shall take you to your brother presently,’ he says, a suspicion of sternness in his voice, though he forces a smile to his lips; ‘only first you and I have got to understand each other better, I can’t wait any longer in suspense.’

‘See, Miss Brownlee,’ he goes on resolutely, a mutinous glance upward from the grey eyes deciding him to refrain from addressing her less ceremoniously, ‘here is a little belt of woodland, you can rest there in the shade and listen to me at the same time; forgive me insisting in this way;’ and a pleading look disarms the girl.

‘A wilful man must have his way, I suppose,’ is her sole response, uttered with a little laugh and a shrug; but her hand

still keeps its light clasp of his arm, and she allows him to lead her on a few steps farther into a little plantation of firs and pines, through which the footpath passes, still keeping close by the river.

It is here that Hugh loses their two figures ; a bend of the road intervening to hide them from his farther observation.

Christine knows now that the first and very delightful stage of her intimacy with Gordon Erskine is irrevocably left behind, and that she has entered upon a second one of infinitely deeper meaning, sure to carry her into difficulties and disturbing conflicts of a graver sort than she has ever yet known. Still through this consciousness runs another of a totally different order—something grand and ennobling has come into her life, making her pulses beat with strange new thrills of an awe-inspiring ecstatic happiness ; her woman nature has found its true element, and she loves as she is loved.

Even at this confusing moment, however,

her wonderful surface composure does not altogether desert her, and while her heart is brimful of strong emotions, and her brain busy with the foregoing thoughts, her lips keep on framing jesting little sentences which all the world might hear if it so pleased.

Dr. Erskine does not take the trouble of responding to them, but seeks out a moss-covered stump, shadowed by the pines amid which they are now walking, and with an altogether unconscious air of peremptoriness amusing in her eyes, if at the same time rather terrifying, makes her sit down to rest, and hear out the declaration of his passion.

And then at last he speaks the feeling, the hopes, the fears, that have formed his inner life for the last year, again and again, as he has been about to give them utterance, being checked by her own determined avoidance of an opportunity to hear them. He has no flow of eloquence at command, but his simple, straightforward, manly confession, uttered in a subdued and occasionally husky

voice, goes right to Christine's heart, stirring it to its depths.

'If I had been a rich man I would have forced you to listen long ago—as it was I thought myself bound to leave you to yourself; I knew that you understood my feelings for you, and were aware that you had only to give me a sign of encouragement to speak out; and it seemed to me a mean thing to force my love upon you, if you were seriously bent upon making what the world calls a brilliant marriage. There, Christine, have I been doing you wrong in my thoughts? tell me it is so, *for God's sake*,'—and here the last part of the young man's explanation ends abruptly, and Christine, who has not been clearly aware of anything but the tenor of his speech, and the alarming throbbing of her own pulses, perceives that he is standing over her, eagerly perusing her looks.

She will not lift her eyes to him; her cheeks flame with a shame-stricken blush and her lips refuse to give forth a sound.

Can she lie to this man speaking so honestly out of his noble, unworldly heart, filled with this marvellous intensity of love for her which is unmistakeably proclaimed by his thrilling tones, hungry for re-assurance—of which, indeed, she has been dimly aware for months and months past ?

No, the thing is impossible, and so she keeps a strange silence. Again that awful black shadow of distrust blots out the beauty of the fair outer world, and penetrates his being with a death-like chill.

‘ Tell me that I have been doing you a great wrong, and I will ask your pardon, with a keener remorse than I have ever known—give me that comfort, Christine ! ’ he repeats, in yet greater agitation, seizing her hand as he stoops towards her, standing very close by her side.

The girl does a sore penance for her previous want of fidelity to her own purest womanly instincts ! yet in truth she has never been so culpable as she thinks herself—if put

to the test her vaunted theories of marriage contracting would have utterly failed to support her through the degrading ordeal of standing before the holy altar with any man whom her heart refused to love.

All her pride forsakes her at this second appeal, her lips quiver and her eyes fill with hot tears, as, letting her hand rest passively in Gordon Erskine's grasp, she looks up into his face saying in a hasty whisper, of tremulous utterance, 'I cannot tell you a lie—you have done me no injustice in your thoughts. I *did* mean to sell myself for position and wealth.'

'And you mean it *yet*, Christine,' asked the low deep voice, speaking so close to her—through her tears she sees dimly that the young man's grave and painfully eager gaze is bent on her face; he has loosened his grasp of her chill little hand, and she draws it away to wipe her quick-dropping tears of shame and penitence, and interpose it as a shield between her and that penetrating look.

‘You mean it *yet*—after all this waiting and watching, and believing in you as a pure, good woman, whose love would be the crown of my poor life—for at the bottom of my heart I *did* believe in you, I swear,’—his voice fails him, and breaks off with a long-drawn sigh, which is almost a sob. He has lost faith for the moment, and feels as if stabbed to the heart by the traitorous fair hand which has for so long been beckoning him on into a fool’s paradise.

And then, as he draws back a step with a look of keenly indignant reproach, Christine Brownlee makes a sudden and unsparing sacrifice of her hitherto obstinate reserve, her dearly-cherished maidenly pride, and follows up her confession of unworthiness, in itself a strange phenomenon, by an action still more irreconcilable with the previous guiding policy of her calm and dignified existence.

‘I *don’t* mean it now—how could I, Gordon Erskine? What can you think of me, if you believe me capable of doing such a

thing ?' she says, rising and putting a shyly caressing hand on his arm, while she glances up into his face, half laughing and half-crying at the same instant.

Ere she has ceased speaking he has folded her in his arms and kissed her, the beautiful, blushing, trembling maiden, who is no sphinx to him any more. Such is his thought at that moment, my reader. Alas ! who can foresee the mental phases, the future circumstances of our lives may produce ?

'And you love me, Christine,' holding her at arm's length, the better to read her sweet, agitated face.

She nods and smiles through a foolish shower of glad tears. She is hopelessly out of her everyday self, and scarcely knows where she is or what she is doing. A mighty tide of rapturous feeling has swept her out into a glorious new life of love and submission to the will of that strong-natured master-wooer, whom she has held at bay for so long.

'And you will be my wife—*my wife*,'

how his eyes shine with tender and awe-struck joy, when he repeats these two words, giving her a long look of meditative scrutiny as if he were fixing each lineament of her sweet face in his memory.

‘At least,’ says Christine, heaving a sigh of disagreeable recollection, ‘I will not be any other man’s. There, now, that must content you, Dr. Erskine.’

She cannot but laugh a little over that name, a minute ago so natural and familiar, already become ceremonious and unsuited to their mutual relation.

Of course such a promise by no means contents him. He lets that *Dr. Erskine* pass unrebuked in his eagerness to understand the reason of this backward step on the lady’s part, and presently draws from her the story of her refusal to marry her cousin, and the subsequent pledge her displeased father had prevailed upon her to give.

When she has finished he draws a deep breath of relief, and getting her to re-seat

herself on the tree-stump—she is not very strong yet, and this excitement has tired her—proceeds to argue against her evident fear to have her father asked for his consent to their engagement, telling her also of a letter he has chanced to receive that very morning, encouraging him to hope for an early appointment as assistant to a noted consulting doctor resident in Edinburgh.

Christine listens to him with grave attention weighing in her own mind the reasons for and against appealing at once to her father, finally yielding to her lover's opinion that, even putting aside considerations of honour, the wisest course to pursue was a straightforward and fearless one. And so it was agreed that on the morrow he should formally address Mr. Brownlee with a petition for his sanction to their engagement, and an explanation of his prospects and sources of income.

Gordon Erskine looked decidedly rueful as he went on to enlighten the young lady

herself regarding this last matter. He had hitherto attached only trifling importance to mere wealth ; but for her sake he would now have been thankful to barter ten years of his much-prized prospectively-happy life against as many vulgar thousand pounds, a naïvely-confessed wish which did a great deal to restore Miss Brownlee's wonted gaiety, lost in the bewildering whirl of emotions she had been experiencing.

‘How much a year do you suppose it would take to keep me, Dr. Erskine?’ she put in with a laughing upward glance of rebuke and re-assurance combined ; ‘you talk of me as if I were an ogress eating half a score of sheep a day or so. I begin to feel ashamed of my own useless existence since I find it costs so much to carry it on.’

‘Ah!’ said the doctor gravely, too much occupied with his pecuniary calculations to get the benefit of her really loving look ; ‘I don’t suppose you could live on five hundred a year or a little more—not to keep house

with any comfort, as you will reckon comfort.'

'Indeed!' laughed the girl, her spirits rising every moment in the newly-found, delightful excitement of having opportunities to be generous and self-sacrificing; 'then I should say I had better die off-hand. I'm certainly not worth the cost of keeping in life.'

'How much do you spend yourself?' she presently added, with all imaginable demureness of tone and aspect, keeping her eyes steadily fixed on the grass at her feet; and in his continued abstraction the question, put out of sheer mischief, did not strike him as at all strange.

'I should say about 250*l.*; no more, certainly. You know what a hermit life I lead with my books——'

'And Beelzebub,' suggested his fair companion, with a little peal of silvery laughter which at once woke him up to a perception of the real state of her mind, supposed by him to be sensibly bent on

practical details ; and he too laughed aloud, cheered into illogical good spirits by the infection of hers.

‘Well,’ commented Christine, with a wise nod ; ‘I should be very well off with the other 250/. I’m not at all such an ogress as you think me ; so when you want to go into the blues you must hunt up another excuse than want of a sufficient income ;’ and a caressing little hand ventured to slip itself within his big one, as he stood towering over her, looking unspeakable things which she understood very well.

‘No horses, no carriage, no men-servants, no brilliant gaieties ; a modest little house in a dull Edinburgh street or square, a few good books——’

‘And you and Beelzebub,’ merrily interposed the girl ; ‘I’d be quite satisfied. Ah, you don’t know me yet ; I am not by any means so greedy and helpless as you have been thinking me. The fact of the matter is that up to this time I’ve been hiding my

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close to them, chirping and fluttering gaily ; a golden butterfly poises on Christine's rippling, ruddy-brown coils of hair, as her head rests passively against her lover's broad shoulder—they see it all as in a dream of wondrous happiness, and will see it again and again as vividly as then in the far-off future days when the longing takes them to wander through the fair picture-galleries of the mighty magician, Memory.

CHAPTER XV.

GATHERING SHADOWS.

‘LEND me your horse, and drive Queenie home yourself, Dr. Erskine ; she’ll sulk all the way if I take her,’ Captain Brownlee had said, with a laugh and a sigh, when, one fishing-basket fairly filled and the other disgracefully empty, our trio betook themselves to the little inn to get into order for their homeward journey ; and though this arrangement was duly protested against, it yet was carried out in the end.

So, as the sun was setting, and the landscape smiled in strange glories of amber light, Christine and her lover drove through it side by side in happy silence, while Hugh discreetly rode a little behind, pensively meditating over the impending changes with

which it seemed to him the future was charged.

Just as they were nearing the entrance-gates of Boghall, Christine, whose eyes had been fixed on the glowing western horizon with a very dreamy air, turned to her companion, who was looking straight ahead at the ponies he was driving, and over them at an approaching horseman, whose figure he seemed to recognise.

'Look!' she said, laying her hand on his arm to arrest his attention, and following the direction of her glance, he saw the last golden gleam of the sun as it disappeared behind a distant range of hills.

'*Our beautiful day is dead, Gordon,*' she went on to say, in a strange low voice of rather tremulous tenderness, and her eyes sought his face, which had involuntarily caught the shadow of her look.

What gloomy presentiment was this she felt chilling her heart, a minute before beating in tranquil, hopeful gladness! She could

not define it, but it was there, sending an inward shiver through her being, while the rider Dr. Erskine had been watching passed close by the pony-carriage, removing his hat and bowing low in return for her mechanical salutation.

It was Sir Robert Urquhart, and there was a peculiar expression of cloudy hesitancy in his wontedly easy and self-satisfied look. He seemed for a moment on the point of drawing up to address the occupants of the carriage ; then he changed his mind, and let them go by, his keen black eyes darting a quick glance of scrutiny at the couple when he perceived that they were not looking at him.

‘What ails you, my foolish Christine ? you look as if you fancied the sun was never going to rise again. There are years of beautiful days in store for us both, never fear,’ the young man whispered with a fond, reassuring pressure of her hand and a smile of brave hopefulness.

They were just at the Boghall gates, and ere Christine had time to respond they were startled by the sudden apparition of Dr. Grierson's gig issuing at so heedlessly-fast a pace that in wheeling round to take the high-road for Langtoun the two vehicles very nearly came into collision.

The ponies swerved and showed an inclination to bolt, but were restrained by the strong hand guiding them. The old doctor, who was driving alone, roared out a hasty imprecation, followed a moment later, as he recognised the Woodend phaeton and its occupants, by an imperative order to stop.

'You're the very man I want. Jump out and hurry up to the house—young Urquhart's taken very ill. I've done what's necessary in the meantime, and am going in to get my dinner. Stay beside him till I come back, there's a good fellow!' Dr. Grierson cried, all in a breath, as they both drew up abruptly.

'All right; but don't frighten Miss Brownlee, doctor,' the young man thus addressed

answered in haste, shaking his head, and darting a rather indignant glance of warning to his rash old friend, who, in the excitement of the moment, had quite forgotten to consider the girl's feelings.

‘Never mind me, think of what is to be done for *him*. Is he dying?’ asked Christine, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands. She had grown deadly pale, even to the lips, and was trembling from head to foot, but she managed to speak audibly, and with resolution to know the worst.

The old doctor cast an angry glance at his questioner. He was annoyed that he had spoken out so roughly, and he could not help venting some of his choler upon her.

‘Dying!’ he echoed with impatience. ‘What puts that notion in your head? Didn’t I tell you I was going home for my dinner? D’ye think that looks as if he was dying? You hold your tongue, and drive off home as fast as you like; speaking won’t help matters.’

Then Gordon Erskine interposed in great

indignation, recalling to the old gentleman's memory the helplessness of Miss Brownlee in regard to driving these rather spirited ponies herself; and by this interference drew down a burst of voluble abuse on his own head, a result which he bore with imperturbable calm.

Hugh galloped up as Dr. Grierson was angrily declaiming, and by an innocent demand whether there was nothing *he* could do—he had met Sir Robert Urquhart, and learned from him that his cousin had, a couple of hours before, been seized with a severe attack of hemorrhage—put the climax to their old friend's passion.

The truth was that previous circumstances had combined to annoy him. Sir Robert Urquhart, whom he hated in his vigorous fashion, had been sent for by the servants, and as heir-at-law had shown an inclination to take the temporary government of the Boghall household into his own hands. Mr. Urquhart's housekeeper—an ancient family

relic, of immense importance in her own eyes—had proved worse than useless in this emergency of sudden and grave illness, and the worthy old doctor's *brusquerie* had scared the other women-servants into imbecility. And then had come the shock of very nearly dashing into the Woodend phaeton, and the shame of having shaken the nerves of an unoffending young lady. The natural issue for his feelings was this fit of outspoken rage, which, fortunately, his friends there assembled knew to be undeserving of serious concern.

‘The very best thing *you* can do,’ he informed Captain Brownlee, after a minute or two of choking passion, ‘is to take your sister home as fast as you can—she’s making up her mind to faint. Just look at her sitting there, as white as a sheet, all because I happened to say that the poor *laddie* up there had been taken ill. It’s a confounded shame that the Lord has turned such shoals of useless women loose on the earth. A man can’t stir

a step without treading on some of their corns,' he added, frowning fiercely at Christine; and here the object of his accusations surprised them all by stepping out of the phaeton, and going up to the doctor's gig just as he was about to drive off, leaving the rest to their own discretion.

'Give me a seat beside you, doctor,' she said, by an effort commanding her voice and a tolerable air of serenity, 'and let Hugh go up with Dr. Erskine. Perhaps my cousin may ask to see him, and at any rate he had better stay in the house till you return. Surely Sir Robert Urquhart is not to be the only relative near poor Will's sick-bed?'

Dr. Erskine and her brother joined in with approval of this idea, and presently the old gentleman, inwardly mollified, though he preserved a stern outward aspect, stooped down to give her a pull up beside him, muttering a grumble against her sex in general and herself in particular.

In another minute they were off, the two

doctors having first exchanged a few hurried words with regard to the case, speaking in too low a voice to be overheard by Christine, though she could not help listening intently.

The gig flew on rapidly, its occupants keeping silent for full ten minutes or so. The girl's heart was racked with keen regrets and longings, and she dared not uncloset her tightly-compressed lips, lest she should break down into a fit of sobbing. The old doctor was musing over the case he had just left.

By-and-by he roused into an interest in his youthful companion, and noticed with pity how blanched her lovely face was, how set a look of self-repression it wore. Of his own accord he began talking to her of her cousin's illness in the most hopeful words he could command, and when, thankful to relieve her oppressed heart by speaking out some of her feelings, she in a way took him into her confidence, he showed, under all his abruptness of manner, a kindly sympathy, which she found very comforting.

He had been the medical attendant of the Boghall Urquharts ever since, as a young man, he had established himself in Langtoun. The present Mr. Urquhart had grown up under his special care, his health having been delicate from his infancy, and he entertained an honest and kindly regard for him.

‘You needn’t have thought I’d have gone off to eat my dinner if he had been dying, poor laddie,’ he said to Christine in the course of their conversation ; and as he spoke he looked at her with genuine feeling, giving an affectionate pat to the small hand she outstretched, with a sad little smile of apology.

She was anxious to know his real opinion of her cousin’s case, and told him so with an earnestness which carried its purpose. Christine Brownlee had grown into a thinking and courageous woman, the doctor thought, and she deserved to be treated as such.

‘He is dying, I can’t deny that, my dear, but he will not die yet. We’ll pull him through this attack, and another one or two

may be, if we can get him to winter abroad. But it isn't possible he can hold out very long,' and the old man speaking thus rubbed his eyes impatiently, ashamed of the moisture that had gathered in them.

'Winter abroad! alone as he is and dying! Oh, Dr. Grierson, I cannot bear to think of it,' was Christine's remark, uttered with an irrepressible shower of tears, and it was then that, in his hasty way, the old doctor made a suggestion, the consideration of which cost her many sleepless nights and internal conflicts between inclination and duty.

'A consumptive's best friend is the blessed warm sunshine—there's no earthly doubt about that. It's worth while making sacrifices to get it in abundance, as you do in the south of France, for instance, while in Scotland here we're breathing in a damp and chilly vault-like atmosphere most of the long winter. You can't realise what alleviation such poor suffering creatures get out of the

balminess of the air, the comforting warmth of the sun's rays, the general brightness and novelty they find around them. I think, if you did, you'd carry off Will Urquhart into the middle of it all before the fogs come on at the end of the autumn. You could do it well enough, you and your mother together, let us say, and the change would do her a world of good.'

The old doctor, who had in his youth passed a couple of winters in the sunny region of which he spoke, having gone there in charge of a sick brother, argued with a warmth of conviction Christine found very impressive, and although at the moment she declared the plan unfeasible, her thoughts kept on returning to it with a strange persistency.

'Well, after all, it would be a deal to ask of you,' he admitted by-and-by, after a meditative silence, 'and he's only a cousin. You're no way bound to sacrifice yourself nursing him, poor fellow!'

‘If it were only myself the thing would be easy,’ sighed the girl. ‘Mamma would like it well enough, I fancy. But there’s my father to think of, and——’ she hesitated, meeting a shrewd scrutinising glance of the small grey eyes twinkling under those bushy grizzled eyebrows.

‘And *somebody else*, eh, Queen Christine? Gordon Erskine, maybe?’ the old man suggested, peering into her fair face. In after days he remembered the flickering smile that name brought to her lips, the haste with which she lowered her eyes, and the faintness of her denial.

‘I’d like to nurse Will now if I only might,’ she said earnestly, after a little silence; ‘he has nobody he cares for greatly except me.’ Her tremulous, lowered voice and the yearning pity in her appealing look at her companion confirmed him in his previous suspicions as to how the case stood between the two cousins. ‘I would make a good nurse, Dr. Grierson; I would learn very fast

what I don't know already, and I would be quiet and cheerful at the same time,' she ran on eagerly. 'He always said I did him good, and surely it is now he would need me most of all.'

Her voice died away in a suppressed sob, but she recovered it presently to say, with a coaxing hand on her old friend's coat-sleeve, 'Mamma could go out with me to Boghall every morning, and the two of us could stay all day, or we could live out there altogether, just as you thought best. There would not be anything wrong in that, surely ; and, oh, doctor, the comfort it would be to poor Will and to me !'

'Wrong in that—certainly not, Queenie !' exclaimed the doctor, taking a meditative pinch of snuff. 'Langtoun folks would turn up the whites of their eyes and be down upon you—*some* Langtoun folks. They'd swear you were trying to wheedle him into leaving you the property, and so on ; but I don't suppose you'd take what they said

greatly to heart, especially as it would all be said behind your back;’ he added satirically, contemplating in mental perspective the course of action the backbiters of his acquaintance would pursue, supposing his fair neighbour put her project into execution, and was in the end rewarded by being made mistress of Boghall.

Christine’s pale face flushed hotly.

‘It would not be true,’ she said with honest warmth, ‘they might say what they pleased. All I care about is to do something really useful for my cousin now in the little while that remains to him to live. You understand how I feel, do you not, Dr. Grierson?’

He nodded and smiled very kindly down into her troubled young face.

‘Perfectly, my lassie,’ he assured her, ‘and whenever your cousin is a little bit better, which I don’t doubt he’ll be ere long, I’ll sound him as to how he’d like your nursing—with your mother at your back, of course.

Meanwhile, I'll get my sister Nancy to go out to Boghall. Your mother's perfectly incapable in serious illness such as his; and, besides, she'd be worn out in a couple of days. You keep your mind easy and trust me.'

'Ah, how good you are under that bear's skin you *will* wrap yourself up in!' Christine sighed, in great relief and thankfulness.

'Why will you do it? It frightens people so,' pursued she, with a smiling glance of affectionate rebuke; and the old man's heart, moved by her evident liking for him, yielded up a confidence which greatly amazed his youthful questioner.

'I was not always the rough and selfish old sinner you've known me, my dear,' he said, looking into her uplifted, grave face. 'In the days of my youth a woman fair and young as you are to-day broke the faith she had plighted to me and left me adrift—she spoiled my life and my manners. There's the secret of the bear-skin, Queenie;' but the old doctor's laugh did not sound merry.

Christine had heard a traditional version of the story often enough, and had only smiled at the preposterousness of associating any romance whatever with the prosaic figure of old Dr. Grierson.

She felt no inclination to smile now, when for the first time in her life he let a hint of it fall from his own lips. She was beginning to look beneath the surface in her studies of humanity, and day by day her naturally acute perceptions were sharpening and her sympathies widening into proportion.

Indolent, swearing, snuff-imbibing Dr. Grierson, with his rough, provoking ways and unprepossessing appearance, was to her a kindred human soul in a pathetically mean disguise ; and the expression of the beautiful grey eyes, for a moment uplifted to his half-rueful, half-comical face, claimed relationship in a silent way that was wonderfully soothing to him.

To yet another of her subjects had Queen Christine revealed herself in a new and very

winning aspect that day, and furnished perplexing matter for remembrance at a future time, when her real nature had become an impenetrable mystery to those who loved her best.

Scarce another word was uttered between the two until the gig stopped at the entrance to Woodend, where the girl alighted in order to save the doctor's time—that evening of unwanted consequence, as he meant to return to Boghall, taking his sister along with him, and to pass the night beside his patient, letting Dr. Erskine go home.

Christine looked after the rather shabby gig, with its slouching, broad-backed occupant, as, having bade her a good-by of relapsed gruffness, made affectionate by the hand-grip which accompanied it, he drove off in haste.

Then, a strange fancy in her mind, she took her way up the avenue in the gathering gloom of the twilight.

Supposing something happened to Gordon Erskine such as had happened to her

old friend in the bright days of his youth, into what sort of man would he develop? There rose up before her mental vision a being whom she had never known, yet whom she could recognise as her brave and noble lover of to-day, his nature all distorted by the cruel force of adverse circumstances—a hard man, suspicious, cynical, weary of mortal life, hopeless of a higher one, his sympathies and interests narrowing year by year. Outwardly there might be a fairly prosperous career of the highest respectability; inwardly a grand soul, capable of godlike joys and sacrifices, might be dying inch by inch in unuttered tortures.

And then, terrified by this phantom of her own conjuring up, Christine came back to the consideration of present realities, and took herself to task for indulging such morbid fancies at the close of *her beautiful day*.

She had pledged herself to her lover—what could happen to come between her and

him? She remembered her promise to her father, but without attaching any great importance to it, for she felt confident that with time she could win him over to sanction any engagement upon which he saw her happiness depending.

Yet, in spite of her efforts to shake it off, an indefinable sadness, other than that caused by her cousin's illness, clung obstinately to her spirit.

She was thankful to see the lighted windows of her home, and to enter into its warmth and security. Her mother, who had been watching for the return of the phaeton, cried out in frightened astonishment when she saw her appearing alone and on foot. Her immediate conclusion was that there had been an accident, and Hugh was lying injured or even killed—the poor lady had a troublesome habit of yielding credence to the most improbable of her imaginings when her nerves were upset, and the day had been a solitary and trying one to her.

Christine's first care was to disabuse her of this wrong impression ; then she asked rather anxiously where her father was, and whether he had asked any details of their excursion, hearing to her relief that he had gone over to Stoneywood early in the day, without making any reference to the doings of his son and daughter.

As the two women sat together over the cheery wood fire in the drawing-room, talking of Will Urquhart's illness and the general events of the fishing expedition—of the one great event Christine thought it best to say nothing until the morrow—Mr. Brownlee arrived, tired, cross, and dejected-looking to an extent which made his daughter feel hopeless of finding him in a mood to receive favourably any of her proposed confidences—that evening at least.

Nor did the news he heard fail to deepen his gloom and aggravate his ill-temper. The dinner passed miserably, Hugh's absence making it even duller than it would other-

wise have been. When it was over, and, complaining of fatigue, Mrs. Brownlee had retired to her own room, Christine made a kind attempt to draw her father into conversation, thinking to distract his mind from the cares which evidently possessed it. His answers were not cheering.

‘There was troublesome business worrying him,’ he owned. ‘The miners had struck again, and his colliery manager and clerks were hanging on idly at an office where nothing could be done.’ Such was all the news of his visit to Stoneywood Christine could collect.

‘I wish we had less money and you had less care, papa,’ she told him, as, by-and-by, saying that he had letters to write, he rose to leave the drawing-room.

She came up to him and took his hand affectionately as she said this, glancing up into his face with a wistful air; but the only effect of her speech was to annoy him.

‘Don’t be a fool, Christine!’ he said;

roughly; 'less money would not bring me less care, but just the reverse. Occupy yourself with matters that lie more within a young lady's province than my business worries do.'

Then, as his daughter, flushing displeasedly, turned away, tears of vexation and hurt feeling in her eyes, he followed her and kissed her, adding in a reckless satirical way and with an uneasy laugh, 'If you had lived my life, Christine, and knew the world as I know it, you would see that there's only *one* thing of primary importance, and that one thing is money. Money means morality, my dear; it means independence, self-respect, peace of mind, domestic courtesies, every respectable virtue—that is, when you have *enough of it*. You can't buy it too dearly—the thing is impossible. Don't wonder if it puts me out of temper to hear a clever girl like you seem to disparage it.'

'Good God!' he ran on in the same strain, but with increased bitterness, as,

keenly pained and astonished by this strange outburst, his daughter lifted sadly-rebuking eyes to his, at that moment gleaming with excitement; 'don't you know what plenty of money means to ourselves?—the maintaining of Hugh's position as a gentleman, your mother's little luxuries that she has been used to all her life, your own agreeable and tasteful surroundings;' and he cast a comprehensive, significant glance, first at fair Christine, in her dainty evening-toilette—assumed only to please him, on this particular occasion at least—then around her at the large and prettily-appointed drawing-room, littered with costly, graceful trifles.

When, seeming suddenly to regret his vehemence, he left the room, Christine sat down by the fire in a listless and drooping attitude, and thought over his words and looks, fully realising for the first time how her father and she were in their views and sympathies drifting farther and farther from each other day by day—how worse than

useless would be Gordon Erskine's purposed petition of the morrow.

Sitting there alone, heavy-hearted, with no one to confide in—she would have reckoned it a sheer cruelty to burden her weak mother with her cares—she weighed in the balance all the luxuries which her father had won for her by years of struggling and anxieties, and found them absolutely worthless as producers of happiness, weighed also Gordon Erskine's love, to end by recognising that to hold that treasure she would reckon 'the world well lost.'

In a little while Mr. Brownlee came into the drawing-room, again starting her from her melancholy reverie by an abrupt question.

'Christine,' he said, in his ordinary voice of composure, 'do you know if your cousin has made any will yet?'

'I do not know ; he never told me and I never asked him,' was the girl's low-spoken reply, uttered without raising her eyes.

'I suppose you are aware that if he were

to die just now, leaving no will, Sir Robert Urquhart would inherit Boghall ?'

Christine nodded, and sighed in a tired and languid way.

'If you have a grain of common sense and regard for your family's interests—not to mention your own, which you've grown too romantic to find worthy of consideration, so far as I can judge by your actions lately—you'll use your great influence over your cousin to make him see his lawyer and have his will made out at once—that is, if he has been foolish enough to delay doing so till now.'

'I would not speak to him on such a subject for the sake of all the wealth in the world, papa,' she said, with an indignant tremble in her tones ; and, muttering a contemptuous remark *à propos* of her silly scrupulousness, her father withdrew, resolving to find some other way of appealing to Will Urquhart's sense of their claims upon him.

When Hugh returned at a very late hour,

bringing news of a slight improvement in their cousin's state, he made his report to his father sitting alone in the library over a litter of business letters; then, seeing that the drawing-room was deserted, he sought out Christine, finding her in her own little morning-room, her desk open before her.

She had been writing to Dr. Erskine—and she told her brother so—giving him her reasons for feeling sure that an interview, such as he had proposed to have with her father on the following day, could but result in a quarrel which would bring misery on them all.

‘And what have you said to the poor fellow?’ asked Hugh dubiously, coming, after consideration, to the conviction his sister had previously arrived at.

‘I have asked him to wait and trust me—what else could I say?’ Christine responded, wiping away a few quiet tears. ‘I’ve asked him also not to write to me or come to the

house until I see myself in a position to let him speak to my father.'

'Well,' commented the soldier, thoughtfully stroking his brown moustache and eyeing her with looks of pitying affection; 'I suppose he knows he can trust you, and that will keep up his spirits—on the whole you're worth waiting for, Queenie.'

Nor was he mistaken in his surmise. The girl's simple, frank little note did not greatly disturb the hopeful, deep-rooted happiness which filled Gordon Erskine's heart. Now that he knew her love for him, it was comparatively easy to return for a little time to his old attitude of waiting expectation.

CHAPTER XVI.

JEALOUS ALREADY.

It would have been hard to find throughout the length and breadth of the land a country house fuller of gay bustle and vigorous young life than was Midforrest at this time.

Sleepy old Langtoun was perpetually being wakened up by the clatter of hoofs and rolling of carriages traversing its long, dingy High Street, or stopping at its modest little shops; by the sight of elegant fair ladies and inelegant yet distinguished-looking strapping and sunburnt gentlemen in shooting attire; by the ring of aristocratic laughter and jesting talk as the Grahames and their guests stirred about on their various errands.

Going to the parish church on Sunday mornings became, especially to the juvenile

part of Mr. Drew's flock, an exciting affair, partaking of the nature of dissipation, so interesting was the spectacle of the crimson-draped front gallery pew, filled from top to bottom with unalloyed gentility, beheld, not in the somewhat disappointing simplicity of its everyday out-of-door aspect, but in the full glories of careful Sunday toilettes.

No doubt there had been an agreeable spice of excitement in the forenoon worship of the said youthful element ever since the home-coming of the Midforrest young couple, but as time went on familiarity with their appearance and demeanour had brought comparative indifference.

Lady Jean, the first novelty of her introduction to Presbyterian services well over, had ceased to startle the congregation by any noteworthy misbehaviour, though she still indulged in the luxury of an occasional whisper and demurely mischievous smile when anything occurred to divert her. Mr. Grahame sat stiff and stolid-looking as ever,

rarely unbending to any perceptible degree ; the most untiring starers at the pair could not but be pleased when the arrival of the shooting season and the emptying of fashionable London brought a reinforcement of exciting interest to the Midforrest pew as well as to that of the Flemings of Langlands and the two or three other county families who attended the Langtoun parish church, driving in from long distances for that purpose.

As mistress of a large and well-ordered establishment, where pleasure was the acknowledged object of life, Lady Jean Grahame was in her element, and won all hearts by the charm of her sympathetic yet merry nature. Her servants adored her for her frankness and liberality, and served her with a zeal which greatly amazed many of her lady friends of less winning manners towards their inferiors ; her guests vied with each other in attentions to the lovely presiding divinity who spread such a rare atmosphere of gay freedom and sociability around

her ; her husband seemed content to give her her own way in all things, and if he sometimes looked a little out of temper and answered her rather shortly, she did not take it to heart, believing that he was only bored by the necessity of making himself agreeable to such a houseful of visitors.

‘When we have Midforrest to ourselves again, we’ll recommence our honeymoon, won’t we, Harry?’ she said to him one day, laughingly wheeling round from the mirror, as he entered her dressing-room and flung himself into a chair, remarking in a sulkily grumbling tone that he might as well take this chance of being alone with her for a little as it was seldom, indeed, she had a moment of the day to give to him.

‘When we have Midforrest to ourselves again, you’ll not be able to endure the monotony of having only your husband’s company,’ retorted the gentleman, in a moody way.

‘Oh,’ laughed her young ladyship, ‘when you are altogether intolerable I can always

send for Captain Brownlee—at least while his leave of absence lasts. By-the-by how much longer has he got to stay away from his regiment?’ she added, with a sudden return to gravity, and a frank, enquiring look was turned upon her husband’s face, decidedly unprepossessing in its expression of suppressed irritation.

‘I don’t know and I don’t care; you’d better apply at head-quarters for a second leave of absence for him, representing your hard case—they’d never say “no” to a fair lady of such winning ways,’ spoke Mr. Grahame, with a sarcastic air; and a sudden enlightenment of spirit sent his pretty wife to his side in a laughing hurry.

‘Harry,’ she cried, putting her arms round his neck and drawing back his head that she might look into his face while she bent over his chair, ‘you don’t mean to tell me that you are jealous, and of your dearest friend, too! the idea is too diverting,’ and the peal of laughter which rang out through that

pretty dressing-room, flooded with the morning sunshine, might have frightened away the ugly spirit of distrust which had for the moment seized possession of his heart.

It at least had the effect of making Mr. Grahame ashamed of his late speech, and anxious to make his wife believe that he had not been guilty of the preposterous folly she had alluded to.

‘My dear Jenny,’ he said, with suspiciously quick assumption of good humour, ‘I’m no more jealous of Brownlee than of any other of your devoted admirers. Naturally a man dislikes to see his wife constantly occupied with other men—he can’t find it amusing as she no doubt finds it, and when people are bored they’re apt to say disagreeable things. That’s how I came to speak as I did just now.’

Lady Jean’s eyes full of quizzical mirth perused his face, still held fast between her small hands. She was child enough to ignore the danger of letting jealousy take root in a

temperament like her husband's, and the pain which accompanies this passion was equally unknown to her. To her there was merely agreeable flattery and harmless excitement in the notion that in spite of his marital *brusquerie* of everyday life he was yet capable of lover-like caprices of fancy.

'Oh, Bluebeard,' she whispered laughingly, giving him a kiss, 'don't try to cheat me, the wicked demon of jealousy has got hold of you, and there will be no more peace for poor me and my admirers, Captain Brownlee included.'

'My poor Harry,' she went on, her fingers straying lovingly through his short-cropped fair hair as he cast rather a wistful glance up into her fair, merry face, 'you may keep your mind easy. I care more for you than for the whole troop of my admirers, although there are some very fine fellows amongst them, mind you, and not one that is not far more lovable than you.'

'That would be a very comforting assur-

to die just now, leaving no will, Sir Robert Urquhart would inherit Boghall ?'

Christine nodded, and sighed in a tired and languid way.

'If you have a grain of common sense and regard for your family's interests—not to mention your own, which you've grown too romantic to find worthy of consideration, so far as I can judge by your actions lately—you'll use your great influence over your cousin to make him see his lawyer and have his will made out at once—that is, if he has been foolish enough to delay doing so till now.'

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‘And what have you said to the poor fellow?’ asked Hugh dubiously, coming, after consideration, to the conviction his sister had previously arrived at.

‘I have asked him to wait and trust me—what else could I say?’ Christine responded, wiping away a few quiet tears. ‘I’ve asked him also not to write to me or come to the

ance if I was sure it was true,' remarked the gentleman, just a little drily, then acting on a sudden good impulse he jumped up and took offended Jenny into his arms, uttering a fond little speech which speedily made his peace for him.

After he released her from his embrace, she fell to consulting him about the toilette arrangements she had been studying when he came into her dressing-room; a bazaar for the benefit of the Langtoun Charity School was to be held that day and the following one, within a marquee in the Midforrest park, and her ladyship, as one of the patronesses and stall-holders, was naturally anxious to look her best.

Her maid was at her breakfast just then in the comfortable belief that Lady Jean's often-changing mind had, at last, been irrevocably made up with regard to that all-important question, 'what she should wear'—every item of her attire had already been decided upon, but lo! in that much-enduring

functionary's absence revolutionary sentiments had crept into her fair mistress's bosom, and she was quite prepared to fling to the winds all the plans previously made with such care.

So while her husband, pathetically eager to please her and seem interested in her interests, gravely listened to her, and followed her deft movements with attentive eyes, she discoursed of her doubts and new ideas, trying on several bonnets, and displaying several dresses in the intervals of her running talk.

If her mind had been less occupied with her pleasant vanities, she might have found cause for marvel in the strange patience of her lord and master, wont to show himself provokingly indifferent when consulted about dress, and to turn aside with some foolish jesting compliment to her unaided personal charms.

The truth is that he was beginning to entertain morbid fears of losing hold of the first place in his darling's affections, and there was

no Herculean task he would not willingly have attempted in order to retain this prize.

It was only when Lady Jean, recovering her powers of observation, laughingly remarked that, surrounded by her litter of finery, 'he was looking pretty much like a bull in a china shop,' he admitted his woful inability to give her helpful advice.

'You always look pretty whatever you wear. Why should you bother yourself over matters of dress? See now, I'll tell you what to do, shut your eyes and I'll jumble up the lot, then touch one and abide by that choice. You can't go wrong,' was his proposed solution of her difficulty, delivered in his most persuasive tones, but of course received with scorn.

Her ladyship proceeded to enumerate cases of husbands who had proved highly capable aids to their toilette-perplexed wives, and finding her touching anecdotes received with smiling *sang-froid*, went on to name several gentlemen then staying with them

whom she could safely trust to choose a becoming equipment for her, thereupon eliciting a good-humoured advice to have them summoned without loss of time.

After the hasty utterance of that ill-natured remark *à propos* of Hugh Brownlee, there was no possibility of enraging Mr. Grahame during the interview, and when the breakfast gong sounded a little later, Lady Jean descended the stairs hanging on his arm, evidently one of the happiest young wives in Christendom.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CHARITY SCHOOL BAZAAR.

As may be supposed a bazaar, so unexceptionable in its object, and so fortunate in having secured the patronage of the Grahames, had been the cause of no little preparatory activity among the Langtoun ladies, the most influential of whom had indeed been the moving spirits of the enterprise.

The Drews, the Dawsons, the Kirkwoods, and the few other families of the town gentility had for months previously employed all their disposable fair fingers in the manufacture of articles for sale at the stalls, over several of which the town ladies were to preside, their county sisters managing the remainder.

The clergy, as in duty bound, had lent their aid to the promotion of the scheme. The Charity School was undenominational, and its children were free to attend whatever church they favoured, though the mass of them stuck faithfully to the fold of Mr. Drew, the loaves and fishes of charity his wealthier flock had it in their power to dispense being, the Dissenters were wont to say, the magnetic power which drew them thither.

So, the appointed day having come, the hour of noon found the neighbourhood of the marquee surmounted by its gaily fluttering flag a scene of agreeable and vivacious aspect. The weather was perfect, the surrounding park smiled in the sunshine or offered the soft shelter of its spreading trees clothed with autumn-tinted foliage; a regimental band brought from the county town discoursed sweet music for the benefit of the promenaders; carriage after carriage rolled up to the entrance gates close by, discharging

their loads of elegantly dressed occupants to make their way on foot towards the centre of attraction, the enormous tent, where, the Provost of Langtoun having in a grandiloquent manner declared the bazaar open, business was now going on amid a brisk fire of jesting and importuning exchanged between the victims and the victimisers.

Little Antoinette Kirkwood, looking remarkably pretty in a dress of mingled grey and crimson, with a tiny lace cap perched coquettishly on her rippled dark hair, watched the stir from behind her aunt's stall, her great eyes alight with pleasurable excitement. She was in the expectation of seeing all her interesting people that day, and such a prospect was exhilarating after the tedium of the last two or three weeks, during which she had been pretty closely confined to the Southfield drawing-room, busied in company with Aunt Barbara over needlework for the bazaar.

Mrs. Kirkwood, in her costly black

robes, a model of middle-aged, lady-like womanhood, felt a flush of pleased pride warm her pale *distingué* face as she heard different passers-by comment upon the loveliness of her adopted daughter.

‘If she only had a little more colour she would really be the prettiest young girl here to-day,’ she said to herself, after a critical glance around her. There were the Dawson girls quite as carefully dressed as Antoinette, yet, although fairly good-looking, devoid of her interesting air; there was Aggie Drew, positively stumpy and countrified in her Langtoun-made, new blue silk; farther away half-a-dozen other middle-class young ladies with whom my story has nothing to do, who equally failed to satisfy Mrs. Kirkwood’s taste.

And then close by the Southfield ladies was a couple of aristocratic stalls, one that of Lady Jean Grahame, the other that of Mrs. Fleming, of Langlands, both thronged with well-born damsels arrayed in stylish attire;

yet Mrs. Kirkwood thought with justice that, Lady Jean herself excepted, and Lady Jean was a matron and need not count, nobody there could compare in attractive looks with Antoinette.

‘A little more colour’ the girl presently had, as a gentleman, with whom she was on sufficiently intimate terms by this time, came smilingly up to their stall and, after an exchange of salutations with the elder lady who regarded him with her most gracious air, preferred a request for one of the button-hole flowers it was her niece’s province to sell at a startling price.

‘Isn’t the bazaar delightful, Captain Brownlee?’ Antoinette said in that enthusiastic, youthful way he knew to be quite unaffected; and although he had seen too many such vanity fairs to find this particular one very amusing, he said nothing to damp her happy spirits, only laughed in his quiet, gentle fashion, and proceeded to make several purchases, chatting with her very much as a

good-humoured and affectionate elder brother might have done.

A laughing nod of recognition and a summoning gesture from Lady Jean Grahame called him away after a little; and Antoinette, in the intervals of attending to her customers, was free to exercise her powers of observation on the doings of her neighbours.

Lady Jean had never looked more bewitching, or seemed in a gayer mood. As a saleswoman she displayed an audacity of an almost unparalleled order—an audacity which charmed too much to let its victims feel aggrieved. Her stall emptied as if by magic; her frank mirthfulness of manner kept on attracting customers who had not the courage to approach other less free and easy ladies; and her triumphant glee in her business abilities was certainly one of the prettiest sights of the bazaar.

Captain Brownlee, for one, thought so, as, detained by the fair, merry siren, he hung

about the stall, watching for opportunities of being useful to her. He would probably have shunned the *fête* altogether had she not previously bound him over to appear.

Most of the other gentlemen present shared his opinion; the only notable exception was her husband, who, feeling for his own part like a fish out of the water, and unreasonably displeased because she was evidently in her element, found that her innocent gaiety derogated from his own dignity and hers.

Vainly trying to hide his annoyance, he wandered about the marquee, exchanging the salutations and making the purchases duty demanded of him, by-and-by departing, as Antoinette and a number of other people noticed, without vouchsafing a word or a glance to her fair ladyship, whose clear laugh happened to be ringing out just as he passed her, and whose eyes were fixed on Captain Brownlee's face, bent down towards hers as he answered some harmless question con

nected with a selling transaction, the figures of which puzzled her untrained calculating powers.

‘The poor doting fool is jealous,’ one observer remarked to himself, a sneering smile gleaming for a moment in his black eyes as, looking in his careful make-up a handsome and distinguished gentleman of merely mature years, he stood politely conversing with one of the fiery-haired Miss Flemings.

‘I’m afraid the honeymoon is at last over in *that* quarter, Sir Robert,’ the young lady observed in a confidential whisper, as she noticed the direction of his side glance; and the silent shrug and significant curl of the lips which answered her did more to prejudice her against fair Lady Jean than a speech of direct accusation could have done.

Yet Miss Fleming, who, like all her family, was good-humoured and kindly, albeit a little given to getting up jolly con-

fidential understandings with her male acquaintances, hastened to explain away her thoughtlessly-uttered remark.

'I only mean that the Grahames seem growing a little indifferent, like other married people;' and a laugh expanded her well-developed bust as she cast a humorous look up into her companion's eyes.

'Indifferent on the one side, jealous on the other, most likely, my dear Miss Fleming,' spoke Sir Robert, with a smile of superior information; adding, in a still lower tone, and with a tinge of sentimental gallantry in his manner, 'you know what the French say in affairs of the heart—"Il y a un qui aime et un qui se laisse aimer."'

The expression of the black eyes looking into the lady's sent a decided little thrill of pleasurable excitement through her veins; if Sir Robert Urquhart, whom the world reported on the look-out for a wife, chose to come wooing to Langlands, Miss Fleming would speedily find that Christian charity

required her to forget all the ugly stories she had heard of his previous life.

But, alas! a moment later she discovered the gentleman in the very act of directing a markedly-gallant stare towards a new comer of the fair sex, who had, in company with her father, entered the marquee.

And indeed good-humoured Miss Fleming, who knew herself to be no beauty, though a buxom and strapping damsel, found it very excusable that he should thus act, for Christine Brownlee, the object of this flattering gaze, was wont to be the cynosure of all masculine eyes.

To-day, too, there was a more than usual queenly grace in the slight figure that moved slowly on in cloud-like trailing skirts of white and pale lilac, her lovely face, with its exquisite softness of colouring, lighting up into smiling animation as she went through the numerous greetings required of her in the course of her progress, the bazaar being by this time at its busiest stage.

Mr. Brownlee was very proud of his fair daughter, and enjoyed nothing in the world so much as an opportunity of thus showing her off in public, a fact which explained her presence there on this occasion. If she had been left to her own will she would certainly have stayed at home, for, partly on account of her cousin's illness, and partly of her own love-troubles, she was not in spirits for such gaieties.

But Mr. Brownlee had insisted ; Will Urquhart, now out of present danger, had sent through Hugh his special request that she would not disappoint her father ; and here she was, prepared to carry out her wonted *rôle* of graceful gaiety and sociability.

It was one of her first public appearances since her accident, an event of no little consequence in the annals of a place so sleepy as Langtoun. Thus a species of reception was accorded to her, giving her ample opportunities of exhibiting her undoubtedly rare charms of manner and general bearing.

Lady Jean Grahame, in whom Conservative British ideas of the sacred dignity of rank were, alas ! sadly wanting, held out both hands to the fair daughter of her husband's agent, and kissed her in the face of the crowd, thereby hurting the feelings of a number of individuals both aristocratic and middle class.

'My dear girl,' she said, in her frankest tones and with one of her kindest smiles, 'I am delighted to see you looking so well and blooming ;' and then, Christine having thanked her with much respectful politeness, she turned to waiting Mr. Brownlee, whose fatherly heart was swelling with proud delight at her ladyship's condescension, and in a jestingly friendly way which greatly pleased him, reproached him with his selfishness in keeping Miss Brownlee all to himself at Woodend.

'We scarcely ever see her at Midforrest,' she complained, 'while Captain Brownlee is good enough to brighten us up with his

company pretty often. I must take him to task for not prevailing upon you to come ;' and her ladyship's blue eyes turned with a prettily pleading air to the girl, who once more bowed and said a word or two of thanks.

'I don't see why you can't do as her ladyship asks you, Christine,' remarked her father as they moved on again ; 'why don't you like to go to Midforrest ?'

'Because I can't bear to be patronised ever so prettily and kindly,' responded the young lady, with a faint curl of her pretty lips. 'In Hugh's case it is all right. Men are in demand where women are not, and his position as an officer——'

She stopped abruptly there, perceiving that Sir Robert Urquhart was at her elbow, and had probably overheard their conversation, low-toned as it had been. Ere Mr. Brownlee had time to remark this break-off in her explanation, that gentleman had extended a frank hand, with an exclamation of

delight at this meeting, and Christine was compelled for courtesy's sake to meet it with her own, and endure the detested, admiring stare it pleased the elderly baronet to fix on her fair young face.

As for Mr. Brownlee, though he cordially hated him, he was gratified by his evident eagerness to meet them upon friendly ground. The poor gentleman had been touched on his weakest point by Christine's previous speech, and his wounded vanity grasped gladly at the consolation of seeing a man of title and property thus pursue them, as it were, with conciliatory advances.

There had never been any open quarrel between the two parties of rivals for Will Urquhart's bequests; the Brownlees had hitherto been careful to avoid intimate association with Sir Robert—that was all.

For *his* part he had never ceased to be a model of suavity, and there was, according to Mr. Brownlee's rather elastic code of right, no harm in appearing to be on easy and

amicable terms, and so throwing dust in the eyes of the Langtoun public there represented.

Preparations for the raffle of a gigantic screen, which had exercised the artistic faculties of the Dawson family for the last nine months, were now causing considerable confusion ; a number of the fair stall-holders had quitted their posts, and were moving hither and thither among the visiting throng, pressing the sale of tickets with various degrees of audacity and success.

Miss Brownlee and her two attendant gentlemen were stayed in their farther progress by want of space, and the baronet turned the stoppage to good account by getting into agreeably close proximity to his fair companion, and gallantly guarding her from the pressure of the crowd, while at the same time he sought to amuse her and her father by his wittily satirical talk *à propos* of the bazaar and its follies.

Of late he had begun to take an uncom-

mon interest in pretty Christine, and consequently to seek opportunities of meeting her. For the *blasé* man of many gallantries there was a piquant attraction in the perception that she disliked and shunned him. A beauty was in any case a source of welcome distraction for idle hours, and so, worth the trouble of pursuit ; but a disdainful beauty, whom he strongly suspected of being in love with another man, was game of a vastly superior order, and justified the expenditure of much time and plotting power.

So, as on this occasion the young lady went on returning very curt answers to his suave questions, and responding to his admiring glances by decidedly stormy looks, Sir Robert felt himself moment by moment sinking deeper in what he called *love*, and discovering new charms in his enchantress—a highly agreeable discovery to a weary man of the world who had feared that he was growing too old to enjoy any such racy excitement.

As for Mr. Brownlee, he had not been many minutes in the baronet's company before his keen eyes had found out the magnetic influence which had drawn him into these markedly friendly advances; and, swift as flashes of lightning, thought after thought had traversed his brain—a very unresting one, as my readers will have already perceived.

Considered apart from his station and possessions, Robert Urquhart was about the last man into whose keeping he would ever choose to give his dearly loved daughter; but romantic fools alone would dream of putting aside such considerations, and as a baronet, the owner of Westerwood, and the prospective owner of Boghall, the man appeared in an altogether different aspect.

Such a match would be a brilliant one, worthy the envy of half the young ladies of the county, and quite beyond the reach of those of the middle class.

He would not attempt to force Christine

into any marriage absolutely distasteful to her, he told himself at this moment ; but at the same time he would take care that the acquaintanceship Sir Robert seemed so eager to make up should not fall through for lack of *his* encouragement.

Thus it was that conversation did not languish amid the trio, in spite of Christine's small share in it ; and observing eyes not otherwise engaged remarked how, as the beauty moved from stall to stall making the purchases expected of the daughter of a reputedly rich man, the elderly baronet kept close to her elbow, quite eclipsing her proud and doting father in the assiduity of his attentions, and coolly neglecting the other ladies of his acquaintance.

To the girl his presence grew every minute more hateful, but regard for appearances obliged her to disguise her feelings and maintain a civil demeanour. By-and-by an exclamation of his set her heart beating fast and heightened her colour.

'Look, Miss Brownlee,' touching her arm to attract her attention as she bent over one of the stalls, 'here come your brother and his doctor friend—I've forgotten his name. What is it? I have the stupidest memory for names;' and his keen black eyes fixed themselves with a momentary glance of intentness upon the girl's face, turning from it to her father's.

The instant change of expression in both their countenances told the baronet all that for the present he greatly cared to know, thus confirming his own previous suspicions. The play was beginning to grow decidedly interesting, and he felt ten years younger than he had done when he first saw his lovely enchantress appear on the scene.

'His name is Gordon Erskine, and he is one of our best friends, as I dare say you are aware,' Christine informed him, with a brave look of appeal up into her father's overclouded face.

Mr. Brownlee felt it would be a most

impolitic proceeding to say anything which might seem to contradict her statement, so muttered some faint corroboration, only cursing his son Hugh's choice of a friend.

In a few moments the two new-comers had joined them, Dr. Erskine looking preternaturally grave and a little defiant, Captain Brownlee ill at ease, and aware of the danger of a collision between his father and his sister's accepted lover.

The two young men had chanced to meet in the park outside the marquee, and hearing that Christine was present at the bazaar in the company of her father, Dr. Erskine had intimated his intention to seek them out.

'I am no more afraid of Mr. Brownlee than I am of any other man on the face of the earth,' he had declared, with a militant compression of his mouth and a resolute gleam in his dark eyes, when his friend had ventured to dissuade him from a public *rencontre* with his father. 'I have had no quarrel with him, and don't mean ever to

have one if I can help it—why should I shun meeting him?’ the doctor had added; and as Hugh hesitatingly hinted that Christine would prefer him to keep out of the way for the present, his determination had reached its climax.

‘If Christine is ashamed of me—or—’ as his companion broke in with an eager protest against this supposition—‘morbidly afraid of her father, it is well that I should find it out. Such a state of matters cannot be allowed to go on when a little honest plain-speaking would put us both on a safe footing. Supposing that Christine has got to choose between your father and me some day or other, which will certainly be the case if he refuses to consent to our engagement, the sooner she makes her choice the better for both her and me. Put yourself in my place, and you will see as I do.’

The thrill of hurt feeling in his honest, manly tones had gone to the soldier’s gentle heart, and he had said not another dissen-

tient word, inwardly, indeed, declaring that his sister had been quite in the wrong to put her lover in such a disagreeable position.

So it came about that Mr. Brownlee found himself confronted by the young doctor with a gravely friendly air and an outstretched hand which he felt it impossible to ignore without better reason than a belief that the latter cared more for Christine than his own paternal ambition was willing to *let* him care.

And Mr. Brownlee, thus boldly accosted under the eyes of watching Christine, behaved with gentlemanly civility, greatly to the young lady's relief.

Sir Robert, with crafty policy, followed his example, and, begging an introduction, proceeded to attempt the feat of drawing the studiously taciturn new-comer into friendly conversation.

Christine had rallied all her powers of self-possession at the first moment of meeting Gordon Erskine, and had given him her

hand and a word or two of greeting without betraying the flutter into which this unexpected encounter had thrown her. It was only when the party, having moved on in company presently became intermingled with the throng, she, finding herself close beside him, his earnest, rather unhappy eyes bent on her face, felt her composure desert her.

‘You are angry with me, Gordon,’ she whispered, uplifting a pleading glance which very effectively disarmed him.

A smile of exquisitely tender lovingness transfigured his downbent face, and answered her before his low-spoken words.

‘I *ought* to be angry, but I am not. You have cast your spell over me, Christine, and I am losing all my natural domineering spirit you used to complain of. See, it is a whole week since *our beautiful day*, and I have not seen you once. Now when I am starving of heart-hunger you mean to give me nothing but a crumb or two of friendly kindness under

the eyes of this hateful crowd. Yet I am not angry—only unhappy.'

Under the jesting surface-tone she recognised the yearning, passionate love that was fain to utter itself, and knew not how, in the middle of this frivolous scene of bustle. She had not the faintest inclination to tease and defy him now, as she had been wont to do in the old days. If she could have had her will she would have slipped her hand within his arm and asked him to lead her out into the fair, sunny, outside world, where they two could be alone together, with full liberty to be foolishly happy in lover-like fashion. To such a deplorably submissive frame of mind had love and a seven days' absence from the loved one reduced Queen Christine.

Her answering whisper and the look of reproach which accompanied it gave him no little comfort.

'Unhappy! Because I have asked you to wait and trust me for a little while!'

'For how long?' was the practical de-

mand, urged with all the eloquence of expression his handsome, dark face could command.

Then Christine sighed, and looked troubled enough to rouse his pity.

'Ah, Gordon,' she said, 'do be patient—you don't know how much I have to make me unhappy just now. There is my cousin Will dying inch by inch, and needing me to nurse him. Mamma and I are going to Boghall to-morrow to stay there for I don't know how long. Then my father is worried with money losses, and is in the very worst of moods for you to approach him. I am in terror lest you two should quarrel—think what a miserable position I should be in.'

'If I could see the end of it all,' spoke her companion, with a yielding air; and Christine seized the opportunity to extract a promise that he would continue passive until she gave him leave to speak out, engaging for her part to do her utmost to hasten this desirable consummation.

Whilst, under the cover of the general hum of conversation, our young couple were thus exchanging confidences, a little incident occurred which aroused a lively curiosity in the mind of Sir Robert Urquhart.

Not wishing to thrust himself between Miss Brownlee and the gentleman whom he supposed to be her favoured lover—Sir Robert felt it safer to approach the object of his growing passion by underhand means—he had permitted them to fall behind, and moved on in company with her father and brother.

All at once he became aware that Mr. Brownlee was being stared at in a very marked manner by a couple of odd-looking, vulgarly-dressed men, standing apart a few paces in advance.

One was elderly, the other young. Both wore shining black suits and massive gold watch-chains, and had the sun-tanned, dried-up look of those who have lived long in southern latitudes, though the features of the

elder man in particular struck Sir Robert as being of a common Scotch type.

'A pair of Californian miners come home with a fortune, and doing their best to look like gentlemen,' was the baronet's inward comment on their appearance; and wondering what on earth they could want with Mr. Brownlee, whom they were regarding with unmistakeably angry looks, whispering together the while, he adroitly slipped into the rear of that gentleman and his son, hoping to overhear what passed between the strangers and him.

Nor was he disappointed. The men stepped forward side by side in such a way as to bar up the banker's path. Hugh remarked with surprise that his father grew suddenly pale, and that his brow contracted in an angry frown even before this mysterious couple had uttered the still more mysterious sentences with which they greeted him in slightly *sotto voce* tones.

'Well, sir,' spoke the elder man, with no

little irritation, 'we've been in at your office, and found nobody there but clerks. I guessed you would object to us speaking over our bit of business with them, so we've looked you up here. What's your answer? You've had long enough to make up your mind.'

And we've hung about waiting on longer than most folk would have done, considering that Stoneywood——' The younger stranger's speech, uttered with much ill-humour, was checked by Mr. Brownlee, who, for the first few moments apparently too much taken aback to have words at command, had now recovered his voice and his self-possession.

'Stop a minute, gentlemen,' he said, giving them both a keen warning glance which appeared to have a restraining effect; 'we can't talk over important business in the middle of a bazaar—it would have been much better to call at the office another day, when I was to be seen there; but as it is, you'd

better take a turn or two with me in the park outside, and go over the matter together. I'm at your service for a quarter of an hour or so ;' and he pulled out his watch, and regarded it with the air of a man who desires to make his consequence felt by those he is addressing.

An ill-humoured retort on the part of the younger man was quickly interrupted by the elder, who signified by a frowning nod his assent to Mr. Brownlee's proposal, and moved on towards the place of exit, followed by his companion.

Then, unheeding Hugh's exclamation of surprise at the disagreeable demeanour of the men, his father turned round to Sir Robert Urquhart, on whose sharp ears not a word had been lost, though he affected to be engrossed with the examination of a distant stall, which he was steadily regarding through his eyeglass.

'I must beg you to excuse me, Sir Robert,' spoke Mr. Brownlee, with his suavest

smile; 'here's a couple of troublesome fellows who have hunted me out, finding I was not to be seen at the office—well, business must be attended to in season and out of season in these pushing days.'

'Ah, my dear sir,' was the baronet's polite reply, accompanied by a gracious inclination of the head, 'I envy you your usefulness to the world.'

'Look after Christine, will you, Hugh, if I find I'm detained longer than I expect to be?' Mr. Brownlee said over his shoulder, as he moved off a moment later; and Hugh's wrath was aroused by the suspicious readiness with which Sir Robert interposed an assurance of the pleasure it would give himself to watch over the young lady.

'She happens to be very sufficiently protected in the meantime,' was his rather cross acknowledgment of this speech.

The baronet indulged in his favourite shrug and curl of the lip; then, affecting to see a friend, moved away, leaving Hugh to

his own reflections until his sister and her cavalier presently came up to him.

‘What has become of *Mephistopheles*?’ was the laughing query which roused him from his speculations regarding the business of these ill-bred and angry-looking strangers; then, as the two young men smiled at this little sally, another female voice broke in close beside the trio.

Energetic Mrs. Drew, radiant in a loud new silk dress and flower-laden bonnet, had come to protest against Miss Brownlee’s permitting her couple of male companions to stand idle when there was an infinity of ways in which they could make themselves useful ‘in the good cause they were all there to promote.’

Refusing to accept their hastily-preferred pleas of incapacity, the minister’s helpmeet forced the young lady under the shelter of her wing and swept off the unwilling delinquents, afterwards keeping them so strictly under a maternal *surveillance* that Christine

and the doctor found no opportunity of exchanging another confidential word.

‘Bless the she pastor!’ muttered Sir Robert Urquhart between his teeth, in the pause of a talk with portly Mrs. Fleming and her jolly daughters, and the long side-look with which he regarded fair Christine spoke significantly of the altogether uncommon interest she had inspired.

When by-and-by Mr. Brownlee returned, looking very pale and out of sorts, though smiling with persistency, Sir Robert Urquhart it was who met him at the entrance of the marquee and escorted him and his daughter to their carriage, waiting at the Midforrest gates amid a concourse of other vehicles.

His hand helped to arrange the numerous purchases which had been made, and gallantly held open the carriage-door for Christine, across whose lovely face a shadow of annoyance and distrust had fallen ; his voice, returning eager thanks for an invitation to

dinner at Woodend—an invitation for the following Saturday, when Mrs. Brownlee and the girl had promised to dine at home—was the last voice which sounded in her ears as they drove away.

‘I detest that man, papa, and so does Hugh. Mamma only tolerates him because he is an Urquhart. Why do you ask him to dinner? I always thought you hated him worse than I did,’ was the speech which awoke Mr. Brownlee from a brown study, after they had driven on in silence for a few minutes.

The answer it drew forth, taken in combination with the stern yet cruelly harassed look accompanying it, very effectually quieted our heroine during the remainder of the journey home.

‘Christine,’ said her father, with an irrepressible burst of genuine feeling—he was sick of the polite mask he had been forced to wear for hours—‘I have my own reasons for what I do, and I have no intention to ask

your leave before I invite guests to Wood-end. I have worries and cares enough outside of my family ; don't begin to stir them up within it, if you do not mean to drive me mad !'

At the hall-door, after being gloomily helped to alight, a tender compunction seized upon the girl, and she caught her father's hand, saying lovingly, as she gazed up into his care-lined, quickly aging face, ' Don't be angry with me, papa—I spoke on the impulse of the moment. You have not brought me up to be afraid of you, you know'—which was hardly the case, as her heart told her even while she said this.

' I am not angry with you, my girl,' Mr. Brownlee said wearily, ' only tormented with endless business worries ;' and his eyes sought hers with an appeal for her loving sympathy, much as her lover's had done when he had pleaded *his* unhappiness, founded, Christine owned to herself in this moment, on decidedly less reasonable grounds.

Ah ! if she could but please and console them both by any personal sacrifice ! But day by day she was finding out more and more the hopeless irreconcilability of their interests, and becoming accustomed to the prospect of having the hitherto peaceful family life embittered by dissensions.

The only reflection which yielded her comfort was the fact that Gordon Erskine had at least agreed to wait in patience yet awhile, and that on the morrow she would be at Boghall, free to engross herself with the sad yet keenly coveted work of tending her poor cousin's last days.

And so gravely ended pretty Christine's part in the pleasures of the Charity School Bazaar.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. GRAHAME'S MISTAKE.

THE darkness was beginning to gather as, the bazaar over and the park restored to its normal state of silence and solitude, Lady Jean Grahame and a little party of her guests returned to the house, gaily talking over the doings of the day.

Suddenly her ladyship, who was walking between Captain Brownlee and a young lieutenant, one of the visitors at Midforrest, came to a stop, arresting her two companions by a gesture and assuming a listening attitude.

A dog's voice, uttering a swift succession of pitiful howls of terror and pain, rang out through the air, seeming to come from the immediate neighbourhood of the house which

they were approaching, and Lady Jean presently recognising the tones of a favourite greyhound, broke out in indignant exclamations,—

‘Somebody is beating my poor Oscar—how dare they?—I am certain Mr. Grahame would not do it, and nobody else has a right to strike him;’ and, unheeding the two gentlemen’s soothing speeches, she hurried on towards the spot whence the cries seemed to proceed, the others following close behind, for the most part amused by their hostess’s excitement over such a trifle.

A minute or two later, turning out of the avenue into the broad gravelled sweep in front of the house, they perceived Mr. Grahame standing near the hall door flight of steps, holding a greyhound by its leash while he flogged it unmercifully.

Swift as thought Lady Jean darted towards him, calling out his name and an entreaty to let the animal go, Captain Brownlee thinking of nothing but her distress, hurrying

after her, while the other gentleman fell back upon the party in the rear.

Mr. Grahame was in one of his dangerous moods, as the expression of his flushed and frowning face plainly declared, and the only effect of his wife's interference was to make him ply the long whip he held in his hand with increased vigour.

The dog redoubled its cries, turning piteous appealing looks upon the lady, whose kind heart was in an anguish of pity and indignation, and who presently caught hold of her husband's arm, and clung to it so tightly that he was forced to stay his hand, although he still kept a relentless grasp of the unlucky animal.

'Let him go, Harry, dear Harry, for my sake! I cannot bear to see him suffer so,' she says, staring up into his stormy face with an anguished look of entreaty.

Her sweet young voice trembles with painful excitement, her colour has died away, and tears are streaming down her face; but

Mr. Grahame, though he notices all that, only feels the angrier because of it.

His glance has fallen upon Captain Brownlee, and has gathered an added gloom. He perceives, too, his guests in the background, politely lingering behind, unwilling to obtrude themselves on what the attitude of the little group makes them believe to be a disagreeable scene. Annoyance at the publicity his wife is giving to their dispute makes him the more determined to refuse her petition.

‘Go into the house, Jenny,’ he tells her, speaking with enforced calm, and bestowing upon her a glance of stern warning, which she is too excited to understand as a reminder that they are being observed. ‘The dog needs punishing, and he is going to have it; don’t concern yourself about such trifles; I mean to be master on my own place, and to do in all respects as my own judgment bids me. The sooner you learn that the better.’

By this time Lady Jean is trembling from head to foot, and her bosom heaves with

rising sobs. It is the first time in her life that anyone she loved has turned a deaf ear to her entreaties, and there is, all unknown to her, a pang of wounded vanity intermingled with the keen pity that racks her heart.

'For *my* sake, Harry! See how the poor thing fixes his eyes on me. Ah do, do let him go!' she sobs, letting go his arm, but only to clasp her little hands in agonised imploring fashion, while she still gazes up into his relentlessly stern flushed face.

Repeating his former order to go into the house, he drags the dog a little aside and persistently continues to beat it, though his wife once more seeks to stop his vengeful arm, this time bursting into a passion of tears and turning appealingly to Captain Brownlee, who, painfully divided between a wish to interfere and a sense of the impropriety of the interference of any third party, has hitherto kept neutral.

He cannot resist the imploring look of the lovely blue eyes swimming in tears, and he

steps forward to Mr. Grahame's side, saying a quiet word or two of dissuasion from further punishing of the offending animal.

'Do let him go for the present, Mr. Grahame,' he adds in a whisper, as that gentleman stops to confront him with a furious stare. 'See, her ladyship has grown as pale as death; the excitement has made her ill.'

Hugh speaks with studied gentleness, and his honest, straightforward regard does not flinch for a moment before the keenly suspicious, wrathful eyes which fix themselves upon his face; but he could not possibly have uttered words less calculated to calm down the passion of rage which is boiling in his quondam friend's breast.

Mr. Grahame turns upon him with a fierce oath and an angry stamp of his foot. He is within an ace of striking him in the face with the whip in his hand, but he restrains himself, clenching it in a convulsive grasp.

'You are plotting to come between her and me. I have been watching you lately;

beware how far you go, Hugh Brownlee!' is the insulting speech, uttered through clenched teeth and with a dangerous gleam in his eyes, whose instant effect is to send a rush of indignant blood to his young wife's colourless cheeks, and to make the man he has thus addressed grow pale to the very lips as he recoils a step or two in speechless grief and anger.

There is contempt, too, in the honest brown eyes which fix themselves in astonished protest upon the infuriated speaker ; but when, a moment later, he recovers his voice, he only says with a quiet dignity, far more irritating to Mr. Grahame than a furious retort would be :

'I do not believe you really mean what you have just said ; you will regret your words when you are yourself again ; I am sure of that, Mr. Grahame.'

As he moves away, struck to the heart and bewildered by this most unlooked-for attack, Lady Jean, who has been standing

close by her husband, regarding him with widely opened eyes, in which, would the gathering darkness allow it, a curious observer might read blended fear and indignation, follows him, anxious to say a soothing word of explanation and apology ; but before she has gone a couple of steps she finds herself restrained by a not over-gentle grasp of her arm.

Mr. Grahame has flung away his whip, and let the greyhound go, and is now at her side, looking down at her.

'Come into the house with me,' he says, vainly trying to speak composedly ; 'let him go where he pleases ; it does not become you to be running after him.'

For a moment Lady Jean meditates rebellion, then her heart fails her, and she obeys, moving on in a dull, mechanical way. She feels giddy and inclined to be faint ; the first hot flush has faded from her face, leaving it of marble-like whiteness. As, saying not a word, they ascend the flight of steps before

the hall-door, she puts her hand on the balustrade tiredly, and he perceives that she has difficulty in mounting.

A great throb of remorseful tenderness stirs his heart, although he is yet too angry to yield to any demonstration of regret. He only takes her arm and puts it within his own, bidding her lean upon him, and so the young couple enter the house, Lady Jean, in her weakness, glad to obey him passively.

Fortunately, they encountered nobody but servants in the course of their passage up to their own apartments. The visitors who had witnessed the beginning of the late painful scene had discreetly hastened to withdraw into the house by a side-door which was a good deal used, and the dressing-bell having rung, everybody now was engaged in preparing for dinner. Safe within her dressing-room, Mr. Grahame spoke as he led her to a couch : ' Sit down here and rest a little. I am sorry this has happened, Jenny, but the fault was your own to begin with ; you ought

not to have interfered with me as you did, and especially when other people were by. Come, forget all about it as quickly as you can, and let us be friends.'

His face and voice were full of real concern and a species of shamefaced repentance, which he could not bring himself to put into words ; but his wife made not the slightest response to his appeal, only gave a little involuntary shiver as he presently took her hand and bent over her, then laying her head back on the cushions she closed her eyes.

There had come a great bewildering black cloud of distrust and fear between her and the man into whose hands she had so confidently given the happiness of her young life. Poor Lady Jean was far from having the nerve and boldness to cope with a nature so passionate and determined, though until now she had been serenely sure of possessing irresistible influence over it.

If she could have read his heart at that moment, as, his fit of jealous fury fairly gone

and a sharp remorse torturing his spirit, he waited for a sign of forgiveness, she would very speedily have thrown herself sobbing into his arms, frankly telling him how keenly he had wounded her, and a loving reconciliation would certainly have followed.

But she had suffered a great shock, and her perceptions were slow and uncertain. She did not notice his expression or his tone of voice, and his words seemed to be very cold and full of domineering pride.

He had cruelly beaten her favourite dog, he had as cruelly insulted her most trusted friend (she was child enough to resent the one offence quite as strongly as the other), he had forced her into obedience which at the moment she was not willing to render, and her love for him was temporarily swallowed up in a strong sentiment of repulsion and half-defined terror.

‘I am not very well ; please ring for my maid, and leave me to myself. I must go down to dinner, in case people take it into

their heads that there is something wrong," she said, after a little pause, during which he had kissed her pale cheek, inly yearning to have her forgiveness, and cursing his own stubborn pride, which would not let him put his thoughts into plain language.

Her voice was changed as her look—quiet, spiritless, carefully controlled into civil composure. He scarcely recognised it as his lively Jenny's. He noticed, too, how perfectly passive she remained under his caress, passive except for a repetition of that slight trembling which had stung him to the quick before.

A conviction that he had made a dangerous mistake in his rough treatment of the sensitive, much-indulged, youthful beauty filled him with gloomy, foreboding fears for their future. He would have given much to undo that unlucky afternoon's work, though now he tried to make light of it.

'And there is nothing really wrong, Jenny,' he made haste to respond, referring to her

last words. 'I know that I spoke too hotly to Brownlee'—his face flushed crimson as the suddenly uplifted grave eyes of his wife met his—'I shall apologize to him. What more can I do? *You* will not bear malice surely?' and he tried to laugh, though there was a suspicious huskiness in his voice.

'If you will make the apology you ought to make, I will never speak of the subject again,' promised her ladyship, sitting up with a long-drawn sigh of relief; and, glad to make peace on such easy terms, Mr. Grahame reiterated his readiness to do this, though at the bottom of his heart he still cherished a keen resentment against the man whom he associated with the change in his wife's manner to him.

Then the maid was rung for and the couple separated, Lady Jean by a great effort rousing out of her half-lethargic state. She, too, had her pride, and it was by no means her desire that her guests should pityingly take notice of her altered looks and manner, and

find any connexion between these phenomena and the mysterious absence of Captain Brownlee, who had previously promised to stay to dinner.

Yet she was one of the worst of hypocrites, and, though she did her poor best to appear herself, the seemingly unobservant visitors had a shrewd perception of the real state of the case. As for Mr. Grahame—he was at no time so full of gay spirits that an occasional fit of taciturnity or increased gravity of aspect need attract general notice—he wrapped himself up in an extra envelopment of stolid reserve this evening, and nobody knew whether or not he was inwardly perturbed.

Once or twice he approached his wife with some trifling attention, and tried to draw a word or two from her, succeeding only in throwing her into a state of painful agitation. Her nerves were upset, and over and over again she was very nearly bursting into hysterical tears, a climax at which, to his infinite distress and at the same time to his great an-

noyance, she by-and-by arrived, when, the household party having broken up for the night, the poor beauty found herself safe within the privacy of her bedroom.

All his efforts to soothe her but resulted in adding to her sufferings, and, keenly pained by her evident inability to keep from showing a nervous uneasiness at his presence, he was obliged to leave her to her maid's care and betake himself to his own apartment in a very unhappy frame of mind.

Ere he went to bed he dashed off and tore into fragments several versions of his meditated apology to Hugh Brownlee, finally contenting himself with one, which a groom carried to Woodend early the following morning.

CHAPTER XIX.

A PATCHED-UP RECONCILIATION.

'SOMETHING is troubling my dear Hugh, and he is trying to keep it from me ; that isn't right, surely,' speaks Christine in her gentlest voice as, breakfast over, she rises from her seat at the head of the table and leans over her brother's chair.

Mr. Brownlee has just gone off to his place of business, Mrs. Brownlee is as usual breakfasting in her own room, and the young couple find themselves alone.

Christine, whilst she dispensed the coffee and did the honours of the breakfast-table as was her wont, had been concerned to see that neither of her two gentlemen had any appetite, and that the few remarks they interchanged with her and each other in the

intervals of their newspaper-perusing were merely uttered out of courtesy.

In her father's case this was not surprising. Many and many a time of late had she sighed over his careworn looks and nervous, altered ways; but she had learned to account for all this as caused by business-troubles which in the nature of things would gradually clear away.

That her own especial confidant and companion, Hugh, should be tormented by chagrins of whose character she was ignorant was a new source of distress.

Alas! poor Christine was already finding life to be full of perplexing cares, and looking back with envy on the sunny thoughtless days amid which I first introduced her to my readers' acquaintance.

Hugh makes an attempt to elude her loving enquiries, but ends by confiding to her the story of the preceding day's painful scene at Midforrest, and finally shows her

the note of apology Mr. Grahame had that morning sent him.

‘I shall answer it civilly, of course; but it is not the kind of note he ought to have written after daring to accuse me of such an impossible piece of baseness,’ the soldier remarks, a tremble of anger in his voice; and Christine, whose fair face is aglow with sympathetic indignation, speaks hotly.

‘The man is a tyrannical, selfish, haughty mortal, who cannot realise that the coolest apology he may be pleased to make can possibly strike you as not being amply sufficient. I wonder how a pretty, gentle creature like Lady Jean can endure life spent in his company.’

‘He is very good to her, and very fond of her in his own jealous way, there is no doubt about that, Christine;’ and Hugh heaves a deep sigh, thinking of the many times the sight of Mr. Grahame’s happiness has filled his heart with irrepressible envy and melancholy.

‘And you think she is really fond of him?’

He gives a harsh little laugh that is not born of merriment.

‘My dear Queenie,’ he says, in a tone of forced levity which makes his sister perceive that she has unwittingly touched upon a sore point, ‘she is *so* fond of him that she has not a thought to spare for anybody else, except of course in the way of common friendly kindness, and *that* she dispenses right royally to old and young, rich and poor, male or female, as they happen to cross her path.’

There flashes upon Christine’s memory the fact that Hugh has often come home from Midforrest out of spirits and restless-looking, that he has all along been suspiciously taciturn with regard to his sentiments towards Lady Jean, and a great inquietude seizes upon her.

‘I suppose a young married woman like her ladyship ought not to be expected to care seriously for anybody but her husband,’

she remarks, stealing a side look at him as he sits idly playing with his tea-spoon, his eyes fixed moodily on the carpet.

'Of course not—she is *his*, body and soul, and the outside world must be thankful for such mere crumbs of kindness as fall from the rich man's table,' says the young man, with another unhappy laugh.

He is very unlike himself as he speaks in this vague, mocking way, and Christine's heart fills with an overpowering sadness. Ten years ago, when he was a mere lad, proudly happy in the possession of his first epaulettes, a heartless flirt much older than himself had chosen to beguile the tedium of her idle hours by laying siege to his honest, boyish heart.

His regiment was out in India at that time, stationed in an out-of-the-way, dull spot where any sort of distraction was welcome. Other officers of more mature years and better worldly prospects had no objections to pay flattering attentions to the lady lately

come out from England to live with a married sister until she should find an opportunity of a good marriage.

After the boyish Hugh Brownlee had been led into giving her the full wealth of that romantic, passionate, unselfish love which youth alone has to bestow, she had coolly laughed at his folly, and informed him that she was already engaged.

Shortly afterwards she had married an elderly colonel of considerable wealth, and, persuading him to sell out, returned with him to England, where they were now living.

Captain Brownlee had lost sight of them long ago, and was wont to laugh grimly over his own youthful passion ; but for some years after his disappointment, the remembrance of this woman's betrayal had preyed upon his mind very cruelly ; nor had he ever since felt it possible to seek happiness in marriage, often as his father had urged upon him the need of looking out for a suitable wife.

Christine, though a child when this first great blow fell on her brother, had in after years learned the whole story ; and now, as she contemplated the prospect of seeing him rendered miserable by a second misplaced attachment, her heart was wrung by keen regrets.

She knew very well that he was utterly incapable of seeking to win the love of any man's wife, and that if he had been unhappy enough to let a secret tenderness for the lovely and gentle mistress of Midforrest steal into his honest heart, he would bury it there, and nobody but himself could suffer from his folly.

All she dreaded was the wreck of his own happiness, which she had eagerly hoped yet to see assured by a marriage prompted by his own inclinations. She, too, had repeatedly in her thoughts dwelt upon the suitability of pretty Antoinette Kirkwood as a wife for him, though she had wisely refrained from all but very vague hints when

chancing to talk with himself about that young lady.

Christine had leisure to think over all this, for, having uttered his tell-tale speech, Hugh, colouring with vexation at having so far betrayed himself, got up and left the room, saying, with a shrug and a forced laugh, that he must answer Mr. Grahame's note.

'Be sure that you do it stiffly enough,' his sister charged him, thereby drawing forth a reassuring 'Trust me for that ;' upon the strength of which she let him go without further urging the assuming of a dignified position in the matter.

So when, an hour later, Mr. Grahame tore open the envelope containing Hugh Brownlee's acceptance of his apology, he was not altogether satisfied with the few civil but decidedly formal lines it contained.

It would have become his agent's son to stand less firmly upon his own dignity, according to his way of thinking. In his heart

he knew very well that he had wronged his friend cruelly, and that he ought to have sought him in person and frankly begged his forgiveness. His wife, too, secretly blamed him for not adopting this course, and her manner plainly told him so. Altogether it was an unhappy morning for him, and he found it no easy matter to carry out his previously formed resolution to appear quite at ease and oblivious of any cause why her ladyship should be otherwise.

That Lady Jean was not herself was a fact patent to all but the most unobservant eyes. She was pale, languid, strangely silent and subdued in manner; and ere the fatigues of this final bazaar-day were half over, she was glad to cede her place at her stall and retire to the quietude of her own room.

Her husband found her there in the course of the afternoon, and, sorely vexed at heart by the change in his bright, pretty Jenny, did his best to convince her of his anxiety to repair his fault of the day be-

fore. He did not utter any penitent speeches, and was perhaps a little curt in his manner of informing her that Captain Brownlee had written accepting his apology; but he hung about her couch with loving attentions and wistful looks which she could not possibly misunderstand.

Although still oppressed by a vague uneasiness in his presence, the offspring of the rude shock he had given to her sensibilities by his unlucky outburst of passion, Lady Jean was too gentle-natured not to be touched by his evident unhappiness. Before the evening had come she had vastly comforted and relieved him by announcing in a few tearful, whispered words her willingness to forget what had happened.

Then he had coaxed her into some degree of cheerfulness, and had taken her down to the drawing-room on his arm, feeling at the moment as if he would never wrong her by another jealous fancy, though she should lavish her precious smiles on every man she

chanced to meet. But, alas! the demon of distrust once evoked in such a nature is hard indeed to exorcise. It needed no magician to foresee future storms in the Midforrest household.

CHAPTER XX.

A GLEAM OF AUTUMN SUNSHINE.

TWILIGHT and firelight mingle softly in the large and lofty drawing-room, with its quaint faded furniture and its half-dozen of long, narrow windows looking out on the glooming tree-dotted lawn.

The house is very silent. The crackling of the scented wood-fire on the old-fashioned tiled hearth, the purring of a sleek black cat that lies stretched out at full length upon the fleecy white rug are the only sounds that, mingled with the occasional sighing of the wind outside, break the restful stillness.

On the great couch drawn near the fire Will Urquhart is lying passively, his head supported upon a pile of soft cushions, and a light quilt of dark green silk thrown over his thin

figure. A little table has been drawn close beside the upper end of the couch, and on it, beside a plate with a cluster of purple grapes, somebody has put a little vase of tea roses, his favourite flowers.

'Who has remembered that fancy of his?' is the thought which brings him fully back to waking life, as his eyes, a minute ago closed in slumber, chance to light upon the cream-tinted many-petalled blossoms set off by a spray of dark green leaves.

Who ever thinks of bringing flowers into the dull old mansion-house, where the last days of his young life are, as he thinks, ebbing slowly but surely away?

And then all at once a long sigh of unspeakable content escapes him, and his sunken eyes turn with a smile of more than human sweetness to rest upon the fair young face of his cousin, Christine.

She has come into the room while he was sleeping, and, unaware that he has yet unclosed his eyes, is sitting in a big high-

backed chair on the opposite side of the hearth, her hands idly folded in her lap and her looks pensively bent on the fire.

She has been crying, he thinks, and his own eyes dim in tender pity for his pretty, merry-natured darling, whose loving heart will, alas! be sorely wrung many a time ere he is laid away in that quiet death-sleep for which he has been longing ever since that day when she had told him with quivering lips and a shower of angelically compassionate tears that she had never loved him in any other way than as a sister might have done.

‘Christine,’ he says softly, holding out his hand to her with a renewal of that pathetically sweet smile lighting up his worn face; and in a moment she has crossed over to him, her glance answering his with a silent eloquence which makes the mere tremulous whisper of his name enough to convince him of the overpowering tender pity surging in her pure heart.

‘My poor Christine!’ the young man says,

clasping her hand and looking into her beautiful eyes, which are bravely smiling through the mist of unshed tears that *will* gather over them, 'it is selfish of me to let you come here at all; but at least you must not stay long—a few days, if you will, but not longer.'

There is a momentary pause. The girl is sternly, crushing down the emotions which, if indulged, would render her utterly unfit for the task she has imposed upon herself, the sacred task no earthly power could make her willing to relinquish. Presently she speaks, steadily, almost gaily, with an accent of inflexible resolution in her voice, beyond measure comforting to the poor helpless invalid.

'My dear cousin Will,' she says, 'you are altogether under a mistake when you suppose I have made a great sacrifice in coming to nurse you. The truth is, I was idle and restless at home, for want of some sensible work fit for a reasonable creature of my years. One can't content oneself with fancy sewing, and practising, and daubing in water colours,

and the like after the age of girlhood is over and gone. You needed somebody to take care of you, and I as badly needed somebody to take care of. I offered you my services through our mutual friend, old Dr. Grierson, and you accepted them. Now here I am, and here I mean to stay as long as I see that I am being of any use to you. If I show myself incapable or disobedient to the doctor's orders, or in any way a bad nurse, Dr. Grierson will be quite justified in sending me home in disgrace; but let me tell you for your comfort, I mean to be a model of all a woman should be in a sick room, and so gain laurels in a new field—Don't you concern yourself about me. I have got the work I've been longing for ever so long, and I am more than satisfied. All you have to do is to let me alone, and I'll manage the rest. There, now we understand each other, don't we?' and she ends with a brave little laugh and a fond pressure of the poor feverish hand still resting in hers.

His tender, grateful glance answers her very sufficiently even before he says in that pathetically weak, low voice, to which Christine can scarce listen without tears, 'I understand how you feel, my dear. God bless you for your goodness! I have not a single care to trouble me now, not a single wish unfulfilled. It is all peace and rest since you are beside me, all peace and rest.'

'And now you are not to talk any more,' says the girl, holding up a warning finger; 'Miss Nancy gave me all my directions before she went away, whilst you were sleeping, you know, and little talking must content you for a few days yet. Mamma is unpacking her things. She will come in and see you by-and-by, and you can say a few words to her if you like. Rest quiet now, to please your head nurse.'

He asks nothing better, poor fellow. There is a deep, quiet happiness in lying there, watching her, as she moves softly about the half-lighted silent room, making little altera-

tions in the arrangement of the furniture, choosing out a few of his favourite books from the litter of volumes that have gradually accumulated there, placing them in order on a little stand near his couch ; lighting a few candles, which she is careful to put where their rays will not trouble him ; tidying the hearth and arranging fresh wood on the fire in a noiseless skilful, dainty fashion, as if she had been at home in a sick room half her lifetime, instead of only upon rare occasions when her mother was confined to her own apartment by real illness.

Christine, in her simple dress of some soft grey material with no disturbing rustle, her plain linen collar and cuffs tied with knots of blue ribbon, her frilled little muslin apron with its tiny bib, seems to her sick cousin a blessed Sister of Mercy, come to care for and comfort him in his dreary solitude. His eyes keep following her lovingly, while a peace he has never known before steals into his heart.

He knows that she will stay faithfully by him while he lives—Christine means what she says when she makes a promise—he knows that at his death she will be mistress of the old house she is brightening with the sunshine of her presence now (just the day before he had made out his will in her favour, a few bequests excepted, and the deed is lying signed and witnessed in the secret drawer of his desk), he has done with the world and its illusions, he suffers almost no pain, and, after the mental misery through which he had passed before resigning himself to his fate, the unharassed state of mind he now enjoys is as heaven after hell.

That autumn evening is for Will Urquhart the beginning of a blessed season of Indian-summer-like calm and beauty. Once more the fell disease that was sapping his life seemed to have stayed its hand for a space. The weather was mild and dry, his cough troubled him less, his appetite improved, he slept better at nights, and was able to sit up

most of the day, and even, after a little time had elapsed, to crawl out into the garden or take a short airing in a carriage.

‘He is decidedly better. May it not be that he will get over all his bad symptoms in time and with great care?’ Christine used to ask old Dr. Grierson, when she found an opportunity of speaking with him in private, but she never could draw from him any expression of definite hopefulness.

Yet Christine maintained a demeanour of almost unclouded cheerfulness whenever she was in her cousin’s presence, and she was very seldom away from his side. The girl, as I have said before, was wont to throw herself heart and soul into the occupation of the moment, and a brighter, braver nurse never lightened the burden of an invalid’s dragging days.

Outsiders thought her cool, and commented disparagingly upon the quiet smiling cheerfulness which made the sunshine of her

sick cousin's life. She knew what it was worth to him, and made it her care that it should surround him like an atmosphere. Only now did those who loved her best find out how noble a womanly nature underlay the surface vivacity of fair Christine Brownlee.

'I begin to grow fond of this room, Christine,' he said to her one pleasant sunny morning as she settled him in his easy chair by one of the drawing-room windows, talking brightly of some little project for his amusement, the while she put his special little table in order and afterwards went on with her own needlework, having drawn her chair near his.

He smiled as he spoke, that serene, grave, tender smile which lent a strange spiritual grace to his worn features, and she glanced up from her sewing to say with an answering look of affection,

'I like the room too, Will—it is so sunny and peaceful—it does me good to be here at Boghall beside you with all the outside world

securely shut out. I have not had such a blessed quiet time for long.'

She spoke with an air of heartfelt sincerity, and her words set him thinking deeply. Christine's was no morbidly melancholy nature, and if she had of late been restless and unhappy at home, as this speech and a few previous hints she had dropped had convinced him was the case, there must have been some good cause for it. Nobody had ever named Dr. Erskine's name in connection with hers, but looking back upon various little incidents of the past he felt convinced that the two loved each other, and that Mr. Brownlee's ambitious schemes could alone prevent the securing of their mutual happiness.

And he so wanted his darling to be happy! Nothing else was of consequence compared with the realisation of his generous, tender wishes for her future.

As they sat there together that morning he interrupted her in the course of her usual

reading aloud of the day's news to draw her into talk upon matters of personal interest, but Christine could not find it in her heart to discuss her own love troubles with him, delicately as he sought to lead her into confidences on the subject. The remembrance of his cruel suffering when he had discovered her unwillingness to become his wife was all too recent to make this possible for her, though her gratitude for his nobly unselfish interest was none the less deep.

'Ah, Will, how good you are! What can I ever do to show you how I regret having ever given you pain?' she said, with a sudden break-down into tears, when, looking with a gentle tender gravity into her blushing fair face full of wistful emotion, he begged her to believe that she might safely trust him, that the greatest happiness he could ever have would be a certainty of *her* happiness.

Fortunately for the invalid, who was very unfit to stand any excitement, Mrs. Brownlee

came in just then, and Christine presently forced herself to a resumption of her wonted composure, feeling keenly annoyed that she had yielded to this momentary weakness.

Next to Christine and Hugh in the young man's affections ranked his Aunt Brownlee, and it was touching to see how grateful he was for her presence in his hitherto lonely home. Never had she appeared in so lovable an aspect as she now did under the pressure of circumstances calculated to call forth all that is best in a woman's nature ; and semi-invalid as she was, the couple of young people were conscious of a comforting sense of *homeness* in the atmosphere of their daily lives whenever she took up her post beside them.

Indeed, everybody who approached Will Urquhart seemed to come under a refining influence, and to lay aside for the time all that was most faulty in their dispositions. Seeing the extreme sweetness of his temper, his uncomplaining, dignified patience and sub-

mission to the inevitable, the least emotional of hearts was touched with a pity full of respect, and calculated to inspire a wholesome sense of the vanity of this world's most coveted material possessions.

When he took his Uncle Brownlee aside one day—he had ridden over to pay him a visit—and in a few quiet words told him that he had made Christine his principal heir, that gentleman listened with a strange compunction, remembering how much selfish scheming he had been guilty of, and realising how basely mercenary he must have appeared to the young man when he had sought to secure him as a son-in-law.

All his wonted readiness of speech failed him—he stammered out a word or two of gratitude and made haste to leave the house, pondering as he rode slowly homeward Will's one request, urged with a trembling voice and misty eyes, that he should never seek to force Christine into any marriage which was contrary to her own inclinations.

Old Dr. Grierson used to leave all his roughness of manner outside when he stepped in to see his patient. He would sit by him for an hour at a time talking quietly, yet with studied cheerfulness to the trio he usually found together. There was no end of affectionate goodwill in the glances shot forth from beneath his bushy, grizzled eyebrows, as he regarded now the one cousin, now the other, pleased beyond expression to see them in each other's company, and to know that at least the heavy burden of solitude had been lifted from the doomed invalid.

Even Sir Robert Urquhart who, to Christine's secret annoyance, was wont to make pretty frequent calls, softened his usual satirical talk into a comparatively inoffensive strain, and refrained from offering his favourite gallantries in the presence of his young cousin.

And when one day about three weeks after Christine's instalment at Boghall, Dr.

Erskine came over from Langtoun, feeling very much of an ill-used man, and inclined to dislike the patient who had sent for *him* in place of Dr. Grierson (laid up with an attack of gout), he too fell under the soothing spell, and forgot his own harassments in a generous compassion for this fellow-man, uncomplainingly preparing to meet a fate from which he himself would have shrunk in anguished dread.

Ah, life and love are fair, and the grave is full of horror to the yet untired eyes of a man in the vigour of his manhood! Gordon Erskine's heart gave a great throb of contrition as he felt the beat of the feverish pulse and marked the ravages disease had wrought.

Then, as if moved by the same impulse the two men looked into each other's eyes with a grave, searching gaze. It was the glance of a moment, but it sufficed to let their souls meet in a mute but comforting recognition. Henceforth there could be no more

distrust or grudging envy between Christine's favoured lover and her dying cousin.

It had been one of Will Urquhart's bad days. The atmosphere was heavy, and his breathing had suffered from it. He had done his best to hide from Christine the relapse he was experiencing, but she had long ere this learned to read each sign of change in his state, and his loving pains had been all in vain. Several times she had gone quietly away to her own room to soothe herself with a quiet cry over her helplessness to alleviate his sufferings, and though he had feigned not to notice this most unwonted behaviour on the part of his cheerful nurse, he told the young doctor of it as he sat beside his sofa talking to him in his gentlest and most sympathetic tones.

'It is cruel of me to let her stay, I fear,' Will said, turning a wistful look on the healthful dark face of the man whom he felt sure Christine loved dearly.

The other hesitated an instant, then spoke

out of the innermost depths of his best nature.

'It would be cruel of her *to go*, Mr. Urquhart. God knows illness such as yours is hard enough to bear at the best—and a good woman cannot be expected to rest content with a useless, frivolous life, when she knows that it is in her power to help and comfort a dear friend.'

'She says she is happier here,' spoke Will, pathetic eagerness in his appealing glance.

'Of course she must be happier here,' was the young doctor's decided reply, vastly comforting to his hearer; then they shook hands with another mutual look of trust and understanding; and, promising to return in a couple of days, he moved towards the door.

Ere he had quitted the drawing-room, Christine entered and, detaining the doctor by a significant look, her cousin beckoned her to him. A little whisper, a grasp of her hand, an eloquent smile upward into her

face, and then the girl turned away, her heart relieved of a great burden, though at the same time stirred to its depths.

‘ Let me walk down the avenue with you,’ she says abruptly, without lifting her eyes to Gordon Erskine as she addresses him, ‘ my cousin says he will not miss me for a little.

Her voice is very unsteady, a swift downward glance shows him that she is with difficulty holding back her tears, and he hastens to open the door and let her pass out, casting a momentary grateful look back at the generous giver of this unexpected solace ere he follows her along the corridor leading to the hall where she is already tying on her garden hat.

CHAPTER XXI.

FOREBODINGS.

A MINUTE later Christine and her lover have left the house together, and find themselves alone in the tree-shadowed, silent avenue. The daylight is softly dying, the air is heavy and damp, fallen leaves lie thick upon the road, giving forth a fragrance suggestive of melancholy fancies befitting the sombre autumn season.

As they walked side by side, their hearts too full of a passionate sense of bliss in each other's presence to have many words at command, they feel, strangely interwoven with this emotion, a subtle sadness no less overpowering.

They are not consciously observant of their surroundings—their inner life is for the

moment all-absorbing—yet in after days they can recall the scene with strange vividness ; the low and cloudy sky seen in glimpses through the half-stripped branches overhead ; the sheep-dotted pasture land through which the avenue passes, a low wire fence intervening ; the long, dim perspective of tree-bordered road down which a boy is leading the doctor's horse ; the high iron gates closing the vista.

An occasional plaintive bleat, the chirping of a few birds, the cawing of a flight of rooks hurrying home to their nests in the ancient elms that cluster round the neighbouring mansion of Westerwood, are the only sounds heard in the pauses of the lovers' conversation, and these sounds, subdued by the heaviness of the atmosphere, chime in like a weird minor accompaniment to the tender and hopeful words they utter.

It is but their second meeting since their mutual confession of love ; every moment is precious, for they know not when they may

have another private interview, and looming over them is the shadow of an approaching separation which may last for many months.

There had been a consultation of several eminent doctors, the result of which was a recommendation that Mr. Urquhart should winter in the south of France ; they had held out no hopes of ultimate recovery, but their admission that the following out of their advice was the last chance of prolonging his life, and would certainly alleviate his most distressing respiratory sufferings, had decided Christine to throw into the scale the weight of her all-preponderating influence over her sick cousin, and so his departure had been agreed upon.

Gordon Erskine had already heard the details of the plan from old Dr. Grierson. Mrs. Brownlee, her son, and Christine were to accompany the invalid, Captain Brownlee passing the remainder of his leave of absence with the little party, and at the close of the year joining his regiment, now quartered at Malta.

The young doctor had at first been inclined to resent Christine's willingness to go away so far and for so long a time, for if Mr. Urquhart lived they would remain in the South till the beginning of May. Reflection had brought him to a determination not to attempt interference with her plans. Then this visit to Boghall had in a most unexpected manner softened his heart into generous pity; and when the girl, with tears in her beautiful eyes, had urged the duty of self-sacrifice in the matter, he had comforted her by a promise to abide her return patiently.

Christine knows how much the concession has cost him, and she tries hard to overcome her natural maidenly reserve and be frankly kind and loving during this little walk. Nobody is in sight, and she slips her hand within his arm, and keeps a clinging hold of it all the time they are together.

‘After all, I think you care a little for me, Christine,’ he says, bending low over

her that he may the better read her fair face, for the darkness is gathering fast.

And then, trembling and blushing, without lifting her eyes from the ground, she makes a confession which in happier circumstances she certainly never would have dreamed of making. Will not her lover have long months of trying loneliness? Has he not already waited long for her poor love?

'I care for you with all my heart, Gordon. I pray God day and night to bring us together—all my happiness is bound up in yours, and my life would be hateful to me if I did not hope to spend its future years at your side. Ah! believe me once for all;' and, smiling through rising tears, she clasps his arm tightly between two caressing little hands.

Gordon Erskine's subjugation is very complete now. She may propose what she pleases, *he* will never say her nay. A whispered word or two of dissuasion spoken by her dear lips is enough to make him give to the winds a resolution to have his own posi-

tion towards her clearly defined before letting her go abroad.

‘What would be the use?’ she pleads; ‘you would only make my father and me quarrel at a time when I should be bound to leave him, and there is nothing so miserable as parting on bad terms with those you love.’

‘The *use* would be that I could write to you freely, and you to me—think of that, Christine,’ he urges, but with shaken faith in his own judgment of the matter.

The girl sighs. The temptation his words suggest is not easily combated, yet she is resolved to overcome it, and presently does so.

‘Listen to me for one moment, Gordon,’ she says in her most earnest tones. ‘I want you to understand just how I feel. Putting papa altogether out of the question, I object to this for other reasons. My cousin Will and I have in a way grown up together, and it is no mere ordinary tie of cousinly relationship that binds us to each other now.

He has always cared more for me than for anybody else in the world, and I have loved him almost as dearly as I have loved Hugh. You know what a cruel blow my refusal of him was. You see that he is dying. How unfeeling it would be on my part to flaunt a new engagement in his face, even supposing that my father would give a ready consent, which I do not think at all likely——'

Gordon Erskine broke in hotly—

'Then you would give me up at your father's bidding,' he says, with an angry light in his eyes, looking hard at her.

Christine has given no little anxious thought to that rash promise her father had drawn from her, and she has finally come to the conclusion that the breaking of it would be less sinful than the keeping of it at the cost of the happiness of two lives.

'No, Gordon,' she responds with a sigh; 'if need be, I will rather break my word to him; but my hope is that I may never be put in such a miserable position as to have

to choose between you. I expect that with time I shall bring him to consent to what we want. I know this waiting is hard upon you, and I blame myself keenly for having been weak enough to let you find out how much I cared for you when I was not free to make your happiness my first consideration.'

'As if that mattered,' exclaims the gentleman, looking softened as she turns a penitent, appealing glance upon him.

'Ah, then, Gordon,' she runs on eagerly, 'let us be only *friends* in the eyes of the world for a few months longer, and let me give myself without reserve to the work of nursing my poor solitary cousin. He has found out that we two love each other, and no doubt foresees how the future will bring us together. But let the matter rest there—there will be leisure enough for planning our future lives by-and-by, when he is dead,' and her voice dies away in a suppressed sob.

The young doctor sees that she is deeply

moved, and his respect and tenderness for her are increased by her anxiety to spare her dying cousin every possible pang. Letter-writing and letter-receiving going on between the woman he has so dearly loved and another man, even while he is dragging out the pitiful remnant of his days, could only be an additional drop of bitterness in his already sufficiently bitter cup.

'I give in, Christine,' her lover tells her, taking advantage of the solitude to draw her close to him and kiss her fondly ; 'only *my* turn must come some future day—tell me that it will—make me sure of it—*make me sure of it,*' he repeats, with an unfamiliar ring of painful doubt in his voice.

She feels her heart beating in great throbs, his troubled look and altered voice frighten her, and all in a moment a mighty wave of sympathetic foreboding of ill sweeps over her spirit, forcing out a response which with her will she would never have uttered.

'Ah! Gordon,' she says, freeing herself

from his arms and heaving a long-drawn shuddering sigh, while she throws an uneasy glance around into the deepening gloom of the evening, 'I will never let any mere caprice of my father's come between you and me ; but who can foresee all the possibilities of the future—of what can we be *sure* ? There is nothing in this world sure except *trouble and death* ! The rest is all misty doubt.'

She takes her lover's hand and holds it tight in a nervous, convulsive grasp ; and his own gloomy fancies are for the moment forgotten in his concern at seeing his brave, composed sweetheart thus agitated.

He has frightened her by his foolish demand of an impossibility—the melancholy *eerie* influences of the spot have taken hold of her imagination, and he is greatly to blame for detaining her there at such an hour.

So he thinks as he soothes her into calm, speaking tender phrases of forced cheer. The bitter truth she has uttered will not

altogether be thrust aside, let him try as he may to get rid of it.

In another minute Christine recovers herself and resumes her usual voice and manner. She affects to laugh at what she calls her 'fit of the blues;' and as they have now neared the foot of the avenue, bids him good-by, promising to go quickly home. He would fain see her safe back to the house, but she is obstinate in her refusal to let him accompany her, and it occurs to him that she does not wish to run the risk of their being met alone together.

So he contents himself with a last tender hand-clasp, and makes haste to pass through the lodge-gates and relieve the waiting stable-boy of his charge, presently disappearing on horseback.

Christine lingers a little way up the avenue, watching his departure with fond eyes that strain eagerly into the gloom; then, pensively pondering over the difficulties that her father's ambition, and, alas! her own once

as obstinate desire of worldly aggrandisement, have interposed between him and the realisation of his dearest hopes, she walks homewards as quickly as she can, regaining the house in safety while there is still sufficient light to distinguish the path.

CHAPTER XXII.

SIR ROBERT URQUHART'S TEMPTATION.

'I SHOULD not like you to be disappointed—when my will came to be read—after my death,' spoke Mr. Urquhart between distressing paroxysms of coughing that shook his thin frame from head to foot, 'so I tell you frankly now what I have arranged as to the disposal of my property.'

'Quite so,' said Sir Robert Urquhart between his teeth and without lifting his eyes from the floor.

The two men were alone in the library at Boghall one chill, foggy afternoon at the close of October. On the following morning the invalid and his travelling companions were to set off for the South, and Sir Robert had come over to make his farewell call.

At the cost of no little painful effort—for he was suffering sorely from feverishness and difficulty of respiration—his young cousin had informed him of the will he had lately made, leaving Boghall to Christine Brownlee. The news had not been altogether unexpected, yet it had given a very disagreeable shock to Sir Robert, and had put him into an inward fury of envy and disappointment, which made it impossible for him to utter any of his wonted smooth speeches, and, indeed, rendered the giving of a merely *civil* response very hard work.

He had taken such pains to ingratiate himself with this wearisome, sickly relative (all the young man's gentle virtues were lost upon him); he had endured such *ennui* in his society—in which he had never been free to be his real self—and lo! all had been in vain; and Boghall, which lay so temptingly on the borders of Westerwood, was to pass into the hands of an artful minx who had no natural right to it!

'I don't mind telling you that the dearest hope I have had in my life was to make my cousin Christine my wife,' proceeded Will Urquhart, after there had been an awkward silence; 'that hope had to be given up, but all the same I want to act towards her in money matters as if she had married me; she has been everything to me for years, you see;' and he glanced across the fireplace at his companion, who was sitting in an opposite easy chair looking very pale and fidgeting nervously with the leaves of a book he had unconsciously taken up.

'Exactly,' said Sir Robert thus appealed to. He had it in his heart to utter a sneer at the sentimental folly of his young cousin, but prudence restrained him. Clearly there was no use in arguing with a Quixotic lunatic of this type, and quarrelling openly with him would but destroy the possibility that even at this eleventh hour he might repent his decision.

The extreme taciturnity of the wontedly

talkative baronet as well as his expression showed Mr. Urquhart that he was feeling ill-used, and, desirous as he was of parting on friendly terms with him, regretting also that he had not sooner informed him of his own plans and so saved him disappointment, the young man tried to give him some comfort.

‘You will find that I have not forgotten you, Sir Robert,’ he said with embarrassment; then, as the gentleman thus addressed looked up with evident interest in the coming revelation, a violent fit of coughing once more prevented the poor invalid from going on with what he wished to say.

Tired out and dispirited as he was—aware, too, that the excitement of this interview would cause him no little after-suffering, for in his feeble state the greatest carefulness was necessary—he gladly welcomed an idea which chanced to occur to him, seeing in it a deliverance from the torment of further *spoken* explanations.

Unlocking a desk which stood at his

elbow, he took out a deed and handed it over to Sir Robert, bidding him read it ; then, still tormented by his cough, and glad of an excuse for silence, he set to ransacking his desk, muttering an expression of annoyance that he had until then forgotten to put it in order. He took out and tore up a number of letters, throwing the scraps into a waste basket, made a selection of a few papers which he wished to take abroad with him, and laid them on a table, then sat waiting until his companion should have finished perusing the will, his mind gloomily occupying itself the while with thoughts of the future day when, he himself having passed away from the land of the living, this deed would be formally opened and read.

In that very room perhaps, on some such chill, rainy afternoon, the little party of relatives would meet ; the old lawyer would go through the regular formalities. He closed his eyes a moment, and was an imaginary spectator of the scene. The sombre black

figures come in at the door and range themselves around the library; hushed voices are heard questioning, giving funereal details, condoling in measured terms, commenting on the strangeness of the will, calculating the value of the estate, real and personal; then, everybody being assembled, there falls a silence, and the lawyer's voice presently begins to read this last will and testament, with whose terms those chiefly interested are already familiar. As the droning tones go on, a few sobs disturb the listening company. Kind Aunt Brownlee and two or three of his old servants who had been honestly attached to him when he was alive cannot refuse this tribute to him when dead; in a quiet corner apart Christine cries silently, remembering how long and faithfully he had loved her.

Ah, well! fair Christine would not weep long, though doubtless she would keep a tender remembrance of him all her life—her lover would comfort her very effectually.

And here, by a strange chance, the sound of a gentle tapping at one of the windows roused the young man out of his gloomy reverie to perceive Christine herself standing outside looking in upon him, her face pressed to the pane, while her brother stood by her side.

She had been absent from Boghall for several days, having been at home busied with travelling preparations; and had now, in company with Hugh, ridden over to see her cousin and make arrangements for their meeting at the station of Langtoun the next morning.

All the painful depression vanished from his worn face at the sight of the girl, and as, perceiving that he was not alone in the library, she made haste to withdraw from the window, he turned round to Sir Robert with a smile which told of regained serenity of spirit.

Sir Robert by this time had attained mastery over his ill-temper and seized his cue

In the most heartfelt tone he could command he expressed his thanks for his young cousin's remembrance of him in his will, where his name occurred as legatee of some Stocks worth several thousand pounds, hoped that Will might live long to enjoy his own possessions, spoke cheerily of the wonderful effects of change of climate, and finally, perceiving that his companion's thoughts were with his newly arrived visitors, rose to go, laying down the paper which had been put into his hands.

As he placed it on the library table, littered with books and journals, his eye chanced to fall on a folded sheet of exactly similar appearance put aside by his cousin to be destroyed. It was the original draft of the will, as he presently discovered, for, a servant coming to the door just at that moment to announce that Captain and Miss Brownlee were in the drawing-room, Mr. Urquhart left him, promising to return in a minute or two,

thus giving him the opportunity of satisfying his curiosity.

And there lay the thrice-cursed will itself, carelessly allowed to toss about in this way, when any mortal of ordinary caution, believing himself dying, and about to set off for abroad, would have had it safe in his lawyer's keeping.

Very possibly it was meant to lie in that desk until the time came to put its provisions into effect ; such an arrangement would be quite in keeping with Will Urquhart's unsuspecting nature ; if so——

Sir Robert muttered an oath and broke off his reflections there, a very ugly notion presenting itself to his mind. He was a thoroughly dishonourable man, but he had some pitiful remnants of gentlemanly feeling, which made him uncomfortable when he found himself projecting any step quite beyond the pale of gentlemanly wrong-doing.

Will Urquhart, entering a minute later, found him pacing the room in a decidedly dis-

turbed manner ; but he himself was very absent-minded just then, and paid no attention to his air.

Apologising for having left him, and begging that he would accompany him to the drawing-room and say good-by to his cousins—an invitation which the gentleman accepted with alacrity—the young man went up to his desk and reopened it, remarking with a sigh of relief that he was leaving all straight there.

‘ Old Forgan ought to have got the will into his keeping perhaps, but after all it will be as safe here as at his office. Did you put it on the table ? ’ he said a moment later, wheeling round to Sir Robert.

His tone was careless, his look *distract* ; he was going away to-morrow morning, and in all probability would never live to return to Boghall. The devil of greed prompted his companion to the committal of a deed which by-and-by cast a blighting shadow over the happiness of several lives ; which from the moment of its perpetration necessitated to

its doer a *rôle* of the most degrading deception.

Swift as lightning flashes came a succession of ideas to the mind of the baronet, and ere his cousin had time to step towards the table he had put the wrong document into his hand, resolved upon an effort to prevent Boghall from passing to another than himself, the heir-at-law.

Let a word of doubt be uttered or a change of expression on the invalid's part follow his receiving of this paper, and he was prepared with an exclamation of surprise at his own stupidity and a prompt handing over of the will, which for the moment he had thrust under a pile of newspapers.

But Will Urquhart, who had never in his life chanced to come into contact with any fraudulent character out of the lowest ranks, and who besides, through his absent-mindedness, was that afternoon doubly armed against suspicion, took the document with all the good faith in the world, and, without even

looking at it, locked it securely into an inner compartment of the desk, keeping on speaking of indifferent matters while he did so.

Not for a moment did the idea of a possibility of mistake occur to him. Several days before he had taken the draft out of his collection of business papers, meaning to destroy it as useless. There had been no fire in the room at the time; he had not wished to put it in the waste basket, as he found it would not tear up easily, and he had placed it on the table, intending to commit it to the flames at the first opportunity. From that hour till this he had never chanced to think of it again, and now, on the eve of his journey, his brain was fully engrossed with other matters. If Sir Robert had known all this, he would have felt much more hopeful of the ultimate success of his villanous scheme. As it was he momentarily expected his cousin to discover his error, and an inward trepidation seized upon him, making him feel shaky and out of sorts. Yet, agitated as he was,

he kept his wits about him, and adroitly slipped the all-important document out of sight in the middle of a pile of books. If search were made for it ere Mr. Urquhart's departure, it would doubtless be found, and the blame of its temporary disappearance would most likely fall on the servants ; if all went well, the baronet, to whom the Boghall library was always to be accessible during its owner's absence, would quietly pick it up early the next day. The stake for which he was playing was a high one, and yet he was risking absolutely nothing, as he tried to reassure himself by inwardly repeating again and again.

Let him once get hold of the will. knowing that its maker was fairly off on his travels, he would speedily destroy it, or at least keep it out of sight as long as it pleased him so to do. At the worst, a delay would be caused. A new disposition would have to be made, and this would require time to effect. In his young cousin's very precarious state all delay

must be attended with the risk of death or prostrating illness preventing the legal execution of his projects ; so it was of consequence in Sir Robert's eyes that hindrances should occur.

Vaguely floating in his mind, too, were the germs of a second plot, towards the accomplishment of which the success of the first would in all likelihood be conducive. Christine Brownlee's beauty had made a powerful impression on the fancy of the idle and *blasé* man, and her persistent repulsing of his cautiously-made advances towards familiar acquaintanceship had but served to pique him into a readiness to sacrifice much for the sake of satisfying his wishes with regard to her.

He had come back to his native land resolved to marry and settle down respectably, to all outward appearance at least. He wanted a wife who would be an ornament to his establishment ; children to inherit his possessions ; a few agreeable domestic in-

terests, such as the majority of men seemed to enjoy ; of his own capacity for finding pleasure in such slow and correct existence as he was contemplating he felt a little dubious, yet he was desirous of trying this yet untasted draught of human experiences.

He would certainly have liked to ally himself with a family of higher social position than the Brownlees, and he knew the world too well to suppose that he would have found it difficult to secure a wife boasting youth, good looks, and good birth, but the fact was, that his amorous passion for this disdainful fair lady had got the upper hand of his judgment, and in consideration of her personal charms and accomplishments he was now prepared magnanimously to overlook the adventitious drawbacks from her suitability to fill the vacant post of Lady Urquhart.

That a favoured lover was in the way he had managed to find out ; but he had a very low opinion of womankind, and it seemed to him next to impossible that a clever and

seemingly ambitious girl should not fling romantic considerations to the winds if called upon to choose between a wealthy and titled suitor and a poor and obscure one.

Sir Robert had been thinking of the matter in this strain for a long time past. This afternoon a new idea occurred to him confirming his resolution to destroy or suppress his cousin's will if he should find it in his power to do so. Christine Brownlee, as heiress of Boghall, would stand in a much more independent position and be much less exposed to the temptation of marrying for money and rank than if she were allowed to remain as she was, dependent on a father who had shown himself very willing to encourage her elderly but aristocratic admirer; *ergo*, Sir Robert had a double interest in deceiving his too confiding relative.

No wonder that when presently conducted to the drawing-room where Miss Brownlee and her brother awaited the end of this interview in the library, the baronet found it diffi-

cult to sustain his share in the conversation. He did his best to appear at ease, but Christine's quick eyes found out his discomposure of mind, and after, with many grave adieux, he had gone away, she commented upon it with some wonderment.

'Positively Sir Robert, who is always so harassingly gallant, did not hear me when I spoke to him; he was pale and flushed by turns, his hands kept moving nervously. Is he actually grieved because you are going away? I did not think he had a particle of genuine affection in his whole being,' she remarked to her cousin. She made no secret of her dislike to the baronet.

Will smiled and looked down as he answered her in a low tone:

'I dare say he was a bit sorry. Why not? He and I have never been anything but decidedly friendly, only the fact is, he probably feels himself ill-used this afternoon. We've been talking business, you see, and I've let him know that my will is made out, leaving

Boghall to you. Your father told you that long ago, I hope.'

'Yes,' said Christine under her breath, her eyes filling as she turned a grateful look upon her faithful friend.

Then hastily brushing her hand across her eyes, she resumed her wonted cheerful air, begging him not to think any more of sombre subjects such as this. 'Please God, we'll bring you back here ever so much better,' she added, with a brave little nod and smile, then, as he was answering her with a hopefulness he did not feel, Hugh, who, sorely against his will, had been seeing Sir Robert to the hall-door, came in, and the conversation turned to the arrangements for the morrow's travelling.

As an hour later the brother and sister were riding homeward, they chanced to meet Dr. Erskine, and stopped to bid him a last good-by. It was growing very dark, a thick drizzling rain had begun to fall, the street lamps were already glimmering through

the thick hazy atmosphere, and but a few words were exchanged.

Yet heart spoke to heart with a mighty eloquence as Christine's lover stood at her horse's head, his eyes hungrily devouring her fair face, at this moment wearing its sweetest look of yearning tenderness.

She loved him dearly, this parting was a bitter trial to her also, she too would live upon the hope of a re-union. Her glance half smiling and half tearful told him this and much more, and laid for the hundredth time the haunting phantom of distrust which had of late been thrusting itself between him and his hopes of future happiness.

As for her she needed no new assurance of his love or fidelity. She had never doubted them for a single moment, yet it was thrillingly sweet to listen to his fond whispers.

The couple quite forgot poor Hugh during these few minutes, and the kind fellow waited patiently a little apart, looking

pathetically lonely, as indeed he felt, for seldom indeed was a weary pain of isolation quite absent from his heart.

At last Christine roused herself to the necessity of saying farewell, and bending down her face over her horse's mane in a vain attempt to hide the tears which at this last moment came in a blinding shower, she whispered a scarcely audible good-by.

She felt her hand clasped between Gordon Erskine's, then his lips touched it in a fond caress, and she heard him huskily echo her good-by. Another moment and he was gone, barely taking time to exchange a parting handshake with Captain Brownlee.

'One would suppose you and he were parting for half a lifetime instead of for a few months—what fools lovers are!' grumbled Hugh, in what he meant for a reassuring way as the two rode off together.

Christine could not answer. The long-repressed emotions of her womanly nature were asserting themselves with uncontrollable

vehemence now, and she was suffering cruelly. She blessed the darkness which was falling fast, making it impossible to read her face, she longed for liberty to give her horse his head and gallop away she cared not whither, if only she might be safe from observation. But there close at hand glimmered the lamps of the Woodend entrance gates, and up at the house dinner was no doubt awaiting them, and her father fuming over their tardiness in returning.

As they rode up the avenue in silence, for Hugh wisely made no second attempt at conversation, she threw the whole force of her strong will into an effort to regain her outward composure, and by the time she alighted at the hall-door she had gained the victory and was ready to face the ordeal of that last family dinner without giving any sign of her inward disquiet.

Yet when the trying evening was over and she had retired to her own room for

the night, she gave herself up without reserve to emotions of melancholy, sitting long at her window gazing out into the gloom with wide-opened eyes that saw no exterior object. Again the terrifying vague forebodings of coming evil tortured her, again she shivered and grew sick at heart thinking of the inexorableness of destiny, the possibility that her lover and she in forming their plans for a united future had but been building glorious air-castles, too fair ever to find a counterpart in the realities of life, and sure to leave behind them haunting memories, serving only to wring their hearts and unfit them for the enjoyments of commonplace existence.

Was she a prey to morbid fancies ? had the blasting shadow of approaching destiny darkened her wontedly gay and hopeful spirit ? That the sequel of my story must tell.

Early on the morrow the little party of

friends took their departure from the world of Langtoun, and at this point falls the curtain, the first part of my simple drama being now played out.

Let the reader suppose that six months have elapsed when it again rises.

END OF BOOK I.

BOOK II.

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

FOREBODINGS REALISED.

THE morning sunshine of a fair April day streamed into the pretty drawing-room of Woodend; a wood fire crackled cheerily on the tiled hearth; a couple of canaries whose cages had been hung outside one of the sunniest windows sang as if thrilled into joyous delirium by the delights of the glorious spring time; flowers of warm colours and faint sweet odour scattered in jars and vases about the large and lofty apartment lent their incomparable grace to the scene amid which Mrs. Brownlee and Christine sat at work, while Hugh lounged idly on the gravelled sweep in front of the windows, his havannah sending in faint whiffs of fragrance.

When I say that Christine sat at work, I

mean that she was professedly thus occupied. In reality her hands were idle ; her dropped embroidery lying in her lap, while her brain was busy with anxious thoughts.

It was the morning after their return from the Continent ; she had only seen her father in the presence of the others for a little while the night before (the train arriving about midnight), and again at the breakfast table where he had presented himself but to gulp down a cup of coffee, and mutter some vague excuses for his absenting himself from the family circle. He had looked so pitifully altered, so prematurely aged, so harassed and nervous, that the trio of travellers had experienced a great shock, though to Christine alone had come the terrifying conviction of there being some secret cause for this change, the first symptoms of which she had descried long before their departure from Scotland.

To Mrs. Brownlee and Hugh it seemed that the last few months had been sufficiently

full of troubles to cause veritable heart-break in the case of a man so absorbed in the pursuit of worldly aggrandisement. Not to mention smaller sources of vexation, two cankering cares of prodigious magnitude had sprung up.

A claimant for the property of Stonewood had appeared—the elder of the two men who had hunted Mr. Brownlee out in the midst of the Charity School Bazaar—and a lawsuit aiming at the invalidation of the title-deeds which had been handed over to him when he bought the estate had been dragging through the County Court, finally being decided against the banker upon evidence so incontrovertible as to make an appeal to a higher tribunal out of the question. Will Urquhart had died early in February, and the will by which he had appointed Christine heiress of Boghall, and also devised to her brother a farm worth five hundred a year, *had never been found*, so Sir Robert Urquhart of Westerwood, as heir-at-law of

his cousin's lands, had taken possession, and all the pecuniary benefit likely to accrue to the Brownlee family from the death was a share of the personal estate, which unlucky investments had reduced to very insignificant proportions.

Very vexatious had these occurrences been to all the members of the family, for not one of them was indifferent to their material interests, but in Christine's case an additional mental suffering had been caused by her fears that the worst was yet unknown.

Her father's letters had been rare and brief, giving no details of business matters, but from little sentences that had escaped his pen she had guessed that some painful revelation awaited their home coming. Sick of suspense, longing sorely to meet Gordon Erskine again and have their engagement become an acknowledged fact, she had yet been forced to stay abroad until now on account of her mother, who just after her cousin's death had fallen ill of a slow fever, and

had consequently been unfit for the fatigue of the long homeward journey.

Hugh had been obliged to leave his mother and sister and rejoin his regiment which had been recalled from Malta to Edinburgh. He had got a few days' leave of absence, and had met them at Dover and brought them home to Langtoun. His stay at home on this occasion must be a very short one, and knowing this, Christine was anxious that nothing should occur to make it disagreeable.

So when, having taken a few solitary turns, he appeared at the open window, and leaning on the sill surveyed his mother and her, his grave bronzed face, with its melancholy brown eyes lighting up into smiles as they turned to him, her looks speedily cleared.

'Come outside, mother and Queenie. Let us stroll round the garden together. This spring air is almost worth the trouble of living for,' he said in that *nonchalant* way of his for which his sister had so

often soundly rated him in the merry old days.

She found no fault with his speech now, but rose obediently to seek her garden hat, leaving him talking with their mother, who, pleading fatigue, declined his invitation. Just as she closed the drawing-room door behind her, her father opened the library one, and called her.

'Come,' he said in a strange whisper, lifting a beckoning hand, and Christine raising her eyes to his face, knew all in a moment that she had arrived at a turning point in her life, and that it behoved her to summon to her aid the full force of her latent fortitude.

Her father was ghastly pale, the muscles of his almost colourless lips twitched convulsively as he tried to speak, a strange hunted look was in his eyes, at that instant fixed upon hers with an expression of agonized appeal.

'Come,' he gasped forth again, as stunned

by vague terror she stood motionless, the colour dying out of her beautiful face, her bosom heaving ; ' say nothing to the rest yet.'

His last words roused her effectually. Whatever horror was impending over them, her mother and Hugh must be spared a knowledge of it as long as possible. By a great effort of self-possession she quietly took up the *rôle* required of her.

' Hugh is waiting for me, I must make some excuse to him, then I shall come to you in the library, papa,' she said, struggling to recover her usual tone of voice, and a moment after she partly opened the drawing-room door, and fearing to arouse suspicion by her altered looks, called through without showing herself.

' Papa wants me to write some notes for him, so I can't go out at present. When I have finished I must look after my unpacking ; you must do without me this morning, Hugh.'

' All right,' responded the young man's

voice good-humouredly (he was pleased that their father should have asked this little service, thinking that Christine's company would do him good) ; and with a long drawn sigh of relief that her voice had not betrayed her, the poor girl followed her father into the library, carefully securing the door when they had entered.

The blinds were down, and a twilight gloom filled the large and handsomely appointed apartment. The hearth was unswept, dust had gathered on the table littered with business papers and writing materials at which Mr. Brownlee mechanically seated himself. Christine, though in a fever of suspense, took note of these signs that no housemaid had entered the room that day, and rightly conjectured that her father had shut himself in there at the dawn before the servants were astir, and had been for hours alone, brooding over his troubles.

And doubtless during all these months of their absence that dreary silent chamber had

been the scene of numberless solitary vigils, during which cruel carking care kept gnawing at the old man's heart; how he must have suffered to have changed so, physically, what painful need he had of her tenderest sympathy!

As, seemingly unable to find words, he sat bowed over his open desk staring dully before him, a look of despair in his deep-lined face, to-day of an ashy pallor, Christine went up to him, and leaning over his chair besought him with fond caresses to confide in her.

Slowly through the horror of thick darkness in which his spirit was shrouded a ray of hope penetrated. With a mighty sigh he laid his head back on her breast as she bent over him, his eyes sought hers in an agony of supplication, and with a sudden out-flinging of his hands he burst out into passionate imploring.

'Save me, Christine. Save us all. You are my last hope. Do not fail me. Oh, if

you knew what I have gone through you would pity me. My life has been hellish for months and months past—I have scarce slept or eaten—my brain has been on fire, yet I have hidden it all ; but oh, my girl, the horror of it, *the horror of it !*'

Again that wild, hunted look dawned in his eyes ; great drops of clammy sweat beaded his brow ; his mouth worked in nervous twitches ; his voice at first harsh and loud ended in a scarcely audible husky whisper.

Christine's heart beat with great throbs of terror and sympathetic distress. What had he done ? what could he want of her that needed such preparatory pleading as this ? In the tumult of her emotions she forgot to say a word of re-assurance, and once more the pitiful cry was repeated, ' Save me, save me, Christine !'

' Tell me everything, papa—keep nothing from me—how can I help you when I am in the dark ? You forget that I do not know in the very least what is troubling you,' she re-

sponded in trembling tones, drawing a chair close to his and sitting down, for she began to feel faint and sick, overcome by this long suspense.

‘ Good God, can you not guess ? how am I to tell you ?—why do you torture me by such a demand ? ’ groaned her father after a momentary pause. His tone was one of unreasoning anger, his eyes gleamed dangerously, a feverish frenzy of irritation succeeded to the despairing prostration of his faculties which had prompted the throwing of himself on his daughter’s mercy. Much mental suffering borne in secrecy and solitude had come very near to making a madman of him, and his moods changed with startling suddenness.

Yet the girl’s proud heart suffered less in seeing him thus unreasonably angry with her than in witnessing his previous humiliating appeals for pity and help. To her there was momentary relief in having him turn round upon her in this way.

Alas! it was but momentary. His next speech, uttered under the spur of ill-temper and annoyance that in an access of despondency he had so far betrayed his secret misery, was to her like a sharp dagger-thrust.

‘After all,’ he said, sitting up in his chair, and by an almost superhuman effort resuming some of his old loftiness of mien, ‘there is no need that you should be troubled with details of my affairs. I trust to your sense of duty not to ask them. I was excited, and exaggerated the extent of my worries when I spoke of them a minute ago; forget my folly, and say nothing of it to your mother or Hugh. What I want to tell you of is an offer of marriage which I have been asked to communicate to you. It is made by’—he met his daughter’s startled eyes, and took to stammering in spite of himself—‘a gentleman—of position; and I must insist upon your giving him a favourable answer. I don’t doubt that you can guess to whom I refer.’

A whirl of ideas for an instant made speech impossible to Christine ; but her flaming cheeks and the suddenly kindled fire of her glance directed towards her father warned him that in her he need not expect to find that unquestioning filial submission which would make it easy to use her as a tool for the accomplishment of his purposes.

Presently she spoke, in a low voice of restrained indignation.

‘ And who is this gentleman ? ’

‘ Sir Robert Urquhart of Westerwood—— ’

‘ *And Boghall* ’—put in the girl, in a strange, unfamiliar, mocking tone. She was trembling from head to foot, her grey eyes shot forth rays of angry light, a painful rush of colour mounted to the very roots of her hair ; then as quickly as she had crimsoned she turned white.

If Mr. Brownlee had ever doubted the truth of her often-asserted declaration that she hated and distrusted this man, he was very effectually convinced of it now. The spas-

modic courage which had nerved him for an attempt to recover his vantage-ground of paternal authority, abandoned in a moment of weakness, took to ebbing rapidly. Christine's next words, spoken with heartfelt determination, threw him back into despair.

'Papa,' she said, slowly putting a great constraint upon herself and checking the fiercely indignant speech which rose to her lips, 'I would rather die a thousand deaths than marry that man, *even if I were free.*'

'If you were free!' repeated her father, in a dull, mechanical way, putting his hand before his eyes as if even the dim light troubled his tired brain; 'what do you mean, Christine?'

Before she spoke he knew what was coming, indeed he had known at the bottom of his heart for at least a year past that Gordon Erskine and she loved each other, and that fear of his displeasure was the cause of their making a secret of their attachment. That had not been the least

of the ambitious man's sources of care and disappointment.

As she made her confession, softening into gentleness the instant she began to speak of the man she so dearly loved, Mr. Brownlee sat perfectly silent and motionless. She explained how she herself was the only one to be blamed for concealment, with what silent fidelity Gordon Erskine had waited, yet still not a word or look showed how her story was affecting him.

Only when, more terrified by this strange irresponsiveness than she would have been by a fierce outburst of rage, she ceased to speak, he put his hand down from his brow, and, lifting his eyes, looked her full in the face, seeking to read her very soul.

He had a keen perception of character, and his daughter was no mystery to him; but interests of the greatest magnitude were at stake, and it behoved him to guard against the possibility of misapprehension.

'So you would give up everything for

this poor country doctor's sake—wealth, position, opportunities of shining in society of the highest class—all that is *nothing* in comparison with the bliss of being his wife and sharing his beggarly fortunes ?'

'Nothing—less than nothing !'

Her father was in terrible earnest, and she was ready to excuse the taunting tone he had used ; only she must take care to let him know the hopelessness of attempting to take her away from Gordon Erskine. Her low tones thrilled with intense passion as she uttered this asseveration ; resolution was written in every lineament of her beautiful face, bravely uplifted to meet his searching gaze ; he saw that she spoke the truth, and the glimmer of hope that had lighted the gloom of his spirit died away.

As a child, as a girl, she had been self-willed to an uncommon degree ; as a woman, under the mastery of that passion which in women is apt to become the one great moving power, she was almost sure to be

defiant should he try to frustrate her dearest wishes.

It was just possible that by going through the terribly bitter humiliation of a confession of the whole truth, an abject pleading for her pity and help, he might gain his point; but now that the critical moment had come his proud nature rebelled at this idea. Nay, a better feeling than pride underlay this unwillingness to open Christine's eyes to the real state of matters, though in the surging tumult of bitter, despairing thoughts which possessed him he was unconscious of its existence.

Such love as he was capable of he had wholly centred on his children. To make their path in life smooth he would willingly have undergone any personal sacrifice; and now, when it seemed that salvation from the ills which encompassed him could only be bought at the cost of his daughter's misery, he had not the heart to blight her fair young life.

Several minutes passed in perfect silence;

then, as Christine, deeply distressed and terrified, waited, longing to know the worst, so intolerable did she find suspense, he turned to her.

‘Go,’ he said, with a gesture of dismissal, ‘I wish to be alone—I was mad when I looked to *you* for help—there is no help to be found. All I ask is to be left to myself.’ And having thus spoken, in a hoarse, low voice, he dropped his haggard face between his hands, and planting his elbows on the table by which he sat, relapsed into a species of mental torpor, a natural reaction from his fever of painful excitement.

CHAPTER II.

CONFESSIONS.

IN the long course of her nursing Christine had learned to be patient and attentive to signs of exhaustion. She remembered that her father had eaten nothing that morning, and it was now growing late in the forenoon. Stealing noiselessly from the library, she went to the dining-room, presently returning with sherry and biscuits, which she offered to him in a tenderly solicitous way very soothing in its quietude.

She had been wont to attend to his little comforts ever since she had been a child, and, partly out of the force of habit, partly because he felt the need of support, he sat up when she begged him to do so, and drank the glass of wine she poured out. While he

did so his eyes kept resting on her with a look of troubled wistful affection which struck her as altogether new, and gave her another source of vague anxiety.

How strange it was that he seemed almost without anger, though she had told him plainly of her love for Gordon Erskine, though she had scornfully refused to listen to Sir Robert Urquhart's wooing !

Was he growing stupefied by suffering, or did he see some escape from those mysterious troubles which had been torturing him ? Her brain was oppressed by conflicting ideas which served no practical purpose.

As she took the empty glass from her father's hand, conscious of his still persistent melancholy gaze, tears sprang to her eyes, and her lips began to quiver pitifully. He saw it, and all the good that was in his nature came to the surface, awakening bitter pangs of remorse.

' Kiss me, Queenie,' he whispered, heaving

a long, deep-drawn sigh ; and his trembling fingers closed on her arm in a detaining grasp of nervous dread lest she should leave him.

Christine needed no second bidding. Her warm heart agitated by emotions of the tenderest pity, she bent over him with fond caresses and assurances of her love and readiness to do all that he could possibly require of her, the *one* thing he had asked of her excepted.

‘ Yet you can save me in no other way,’ he groaned, big beads of sweat again breaking out on his forehead in the anguish caused by thoughts of the terrible future which seemed impending over himself and those he loved best.

‘ Save you from *what*, papa ?’ demanded the poor girl, wringing her hands in despair ; ‘ there must be an end put to this suspense. Save you from what ?’ she repeated with feverish eagerness a moment after, seeing that no answer was forthcoming.

Then his overburdened mind relieved itself by putting into words some of the horror he was experiencing.

'From ruin, disgrace, suicide!—could I live to face a shameful trial, a convict's fate? Oh, my God! that after all my struggling and striving and ambition this is to be the end!—miserable failure, dishonour, a death at my own hands!'

As Christine listened, her face, already pale, blanching to a marble whiteness, her large eyes dilating with terror, her father rose from his chair, and, pushing her aside with altogether unconscious roughness, began to pace the room with long and hurried strides, speaking wildly, and throwing out his hands with violent gestures of irrepressible excitement.

'If my death could end it all it would be nothing—but the shame will come out—there will be no mercy shown—these children and their mother will be disgraced for ever. Oh, my God! this is hell—I have lived in

hell for months and months, day and night, while the world has been going on with other men smoothly and easily.'

He was almost mad with excitement, and scarcely knowing what he did, he took to cursing his unhappy destiny and railing against the God who had permitted him to live so long only to come to these miserable straits. Presently he was stopped and recalled to himself by feeling a hand clutch his arm, and hearing a voice speaking close to him.

'Be a man, and bear it. Think of my mother and Hugh—do you mean to break their hearts?' Christine was saying, in low, stern tones which betrayed intense though restrained anguish.

He stopped his frenzied utterances and stared at her blankly, scarcely recognising in this pallid, horror-stricken face that of his pretty, bright Christine. She looked older by ten years, all her beauty was dimmed for the time, and not a sign of pity or tenderness

was visible in her sternly set features, whose immobility struck him as death-like.

In very truth the girl felt as if she had died in the few minutes which had elapsed since her father's hand had drawn aside the curtain revealing the long-hidden skeleton. Swift as lightning flashes had come a rush of memories, of inferences, leading her to the conclusion that the terrible words to which she listened gave no exaggerated picture of the horrors of their position. Shudderingly she had cast a downward glance into the abyss of hopeless misery towards which she felt herself sinking. From the very first instant she recognised that it would be simply impossible to her to stand aside and see ruin which she could avert blight the lives to which her own had been linked all these fair, happy years of her childhood and youth.

She despised and almost hated her father in her first discovery of his folly and culpability, yet she instinctively felt that she must save him at any sacrifice ; he and her mother

and Hugh stood too close to her to let her take any wide outlook on the rightfulness or wrongfulness of the course of action she was nerving herself to adopt.

Gordon Erskine's heart might break, she herself might writhe in life-long agonies of mental anguish, but the family name must be saved from open disgrace, those who bore it from shameful ruin.

'Sit down and tell me everything in plain language. I will help you if it is in my power, no matter *what* you ask of me. I promise you before God,' Christine said, after there had been a painful silence, during which they had both sat looking blankly into vacancy, their minds filled with torturing thoughts.

She spoke very coldly, very sternly, but in her words her father saw a prospect of salvation, and though again and again, in moments of utter despondency, he had looked the thought of suicide in the face, and been very near seeking this sharp cure for the

miseries of life, he felt a thrill of reviving hope run through his veins.

If Christine would but show herself a strong-minded, unromantic woman of the world, with a due appreciation of the value of the solid advantages a marriage with Sir Robert Urquhart would bring in its train, all might yet be well. And, even if Christine were incapable of schooling her heart into contentment, yet out of a sense of duty to her family would accept this offer, was it not highly probable that time, the healer of so many wounds, might teach her forgetfulness of the past and bring her average happiness?

Mr. Brownlee detested Sir Robert Urquhart, but in his desperation he was inclined to make light of any fears lest his present fair professions should prove insincere; a drowning man does not stop to examine the strength of a rope flung within his reach.

'We are all in your hands, Christine; have mercy. Oh, my girl, if you will, you can save me yet; it is not too late; and from

first to last I have done my best for Hugh and you, never thinking of my own comfort or pleasure in comparison with your success in life. All my wrongdoing came from my ambition for you; can you not forgive it?' he pleaded, stretching out his hand to her; but, without touching it or giving a sign of relenting, she merely repeated her demand for a full explanation, at last succeeding in drawing it forth.

The reader, I doubt not, can guess the gist of the banker's confession. Early lucky speculations had tempted him into rash haste to be rich, and he had secretly gambled away in Stock Exchange transactions the accumulated savings of years, during which his coal-pits and various small home investments had paid well. Then, finding himself fettered through want of capital, he had helped himself from the funds entrusted to him as bank agent, his cashier conniving at this violation of faith in the persuasion, of which he himself was full, that he would have no difficulty

in restoring the money when it was demanded.

‘Then we are beggars and worse,’ said Christine bitterly, with a glance round on the costly furniture, the piles of valuable books. ‘Why have you allowed us to go on living in this sinful luxury, never making the least attempt at drawing in our expenses?’

Her father, already irritated through the pain and shame of telling the story to which she had been listening, responded with a groan of impatience. ‘Good God!’ he said, springing up and recommencing his restless pacing of the floor. ‘Did I *dare* retrench? Was not my credit dependent on our keeping up a show of wealth? Besides, I kept thinking that your cousin’s death would alter our position entirely; that Hugh and you would marry well some day or other. What curse has been upon us that everything has gone wrong?’

‘The curse of pride and greed and worldly-mindedness,’ broke in the girl, letting

her head droop and staring at the floor with dumb, blank gaze. 'We have lived solely for ourselves, for our own glory and gratification ; now retribution is beginning.'

She was thinking of her own faults and of the general tone of their family life rather than of her father, but when, believing himself personally accused, he made a vehement assertion that for his part he had at least been unselfish, she spoke a sharp retort.

'I have lived for Hugh and you, Christine,' he declared, stepping in front of her chair and looking very ruefully at her. Then the grey eyes were uplifted, emitting a lightning flash of disdain, and the pale lips, set in curves of restrained anguish, unclosed to say sternly :

'As part and parcel of yourself, bearing your name, identified with you in the eyes of the world.'

Yes, after all, perhaps that was the truth. The virtue of special paternal solicitude, on which he had inwardly prided himself, had

probably had an admixture of selfish alloy; yet it was cruel on his daughter's part to reproach him because of this, and in an hour when he was already overwhelmed by cares and fears and torturing regrets.

So he thought as he turned aside and sat down tiredly, and so, after an instant's reflection, thought Christine herself. When she presently spoke again it was with studied quiet of manner.

'How much money, bank money, has to be replaced? Let me understand everything clearly.'

The subject was a very sore one, and he would have returned an evasive answer, but that something in her look forced him to compliance with her will. Ignorant of business as she was, she was yet naturally clear-headed and practical, and, the first bewilderment of the shock her father's confession had caused her being overcome, she was now painfully bending the whole powers of her mind on a consideration of their terrible

position, with a view to finding out whether there might not be some way of extrication which had escaped her father's search.

'A great sum—I don't know exactly—something like twenty thousand pounds,' he got out, gaspingly.

'*All lost?*' asked Christine in a voice of despairing blankness.

'All lost, all lost,' he echoed, sinking back in his chair, and shutting his eyes in a weary way that prayed her to press him no farther,

Unheeding she went on with her investigation, her eyes moodily bent on the floor, her hands pushing back her hair from her aching temples, which were burning feverishly.

'The house here, the furniture, the plate, the horses. How much would they bring, supposing we sold everything?'

Her father's answer did not surprise her.

'Woodend has been mortgaged heavily—it would bring almost nothing—why torture me with questions, Christine?—nothing here is

mine except in name. I have had advances on the security of the plate and furniture—if I had not I could not have paid the costs of that damnable lawsuit without running more risks.'

'Who gave you these advances?' pursued the girl, in that same tone of stern stoicism; and this time her question had to be twice urged before it brought a reply.

'Sir Robert Urquhart; he guessed that I needed money and offered it;' and as he made this admission, Mr. Brownlee wiped his brow, again bedewed with drops of sweat, and glanced entreatingly into the white, set face opposite to him. But she had not yet got through her hard task.

'And Sir Robert Urquhart holds the mortgage on Woodend, perhaps?' she suggested, a dreary phantom of a mocking smile curling her lip, when her ear presently caught a low-spoken admission that she had guessed rightly.

'And now we are altogether at his mercy, I suppose; God pity us!' she said bitterly,

after a few moments' silent consideration. Her manner was so unnaturally restrained, so unwomanlike, that her father was awed by it into complete subjection to her will. When she proceeded to question him as to his chances of success, supposing that he should apply for money aid to other acquaintances, he answered her patiently. Alas ! poor Christine could draw no comfort from his replies. He was not of a nature to make solid friendships, and no substantial help need be looked for except such as Sir Robert Urquhart might give out of a selfish motive. Mr. Grahame had already been applied to in vain.

She was trapped very effectually, she told herself in one of the bitter mental reviews of her position which filled the pauses in her interrogation of her father.

Yet she suggested other quarters whence some help might come, though in her heart she recognised the impossibility of such help being adequate.

'If Dr. Grierson knew the truth, he

would do something to save you, and as for Gordon Erskine, he would sacrifice for *my* sake every shilling he has in the world,' she said, shuddering involuntarily as she spoke her lover's name.

Then Mr. Brownlee's powers of quiet endurance gave way, and he turned upon the speaker in a fit of impotent rage, his whole frame trembling.

'Supposing you are right, what good could two or three thousand pounds do? These men are not able to give me any effectual help, though they were willing to do it, and, by God, Christine! before I will go round the circle of people who have known me, begging for dribblets of money, imploring their pity, I will blow out my brains—don't for a moment doubt, that if you fail me, I have nerve enough to end my sufferings so;' and with eyes starting from their sockets, and convulsive twitches distorting his haggard face, he came over to Christine, and grasping her arm with a violence of which in his excite-

ment he was unaware, demanded an instant answer to his question, whether she would accept this offer of marriage and so save them all from utter ruin and disgrace.

A shiver, a stifled moan, were all the outward indications of the horror his words caused—by-and-by when she could be alone with her misery, she would sob her fill—for the present there was yet work in hand. The stern quietude of her upward glance had the effect of making him ashamed of the threat he had used oftener than once during this interview—muttering an entreaty that she would forget his wild words, he released her arm and turned away. Though Christine would not in her present mood deign to notice this fearful menace of suicide, it inwardly thrilled her with pangs of terror. She felt sure that he meant what he had said, and was capable of imbruing his hands in his own blood should there be no other means of evading arrest and its subsequent horrors. Recoiling from this revolting idea, her mind

turned to contemplate the chances of safety which might lie in the acceptance of Sir Robert Urquhart's offer, and she unflinchingly persisted in her interrogation of her father.

'What would this man,'—her tone of hate and scorn made it clear to him whom she meant—'do for you, supposing I married him?' she asked, choking over these last bitter words. 'Do you mean me to understand that he would pay down that immense sum and connect himself with ——'

'A disgraced man,' broke in Mr. Brownlee, with a groan of impatience, realising that further torturing explanations were required of him. 'Good heavens, Christine! you surely understand that he would require to be kept in ignorance of the real state of my affairs until the marriage was over, or at least everything was settled and the engagement made public—then for his own sake he would advance what money was needed to prevent exposure—surely you cannot suppose he

would walk into this with his eyes open—not a man in a hundred would do it.’

Here was a most unlooked-for new revelation, yet in the present stupefaction of her moral perceptions, gradually deadening as her mind was being penetrated by the knowledge of her father’s criminality, and the conviction that she could save him from exposure only by a future course of carefully-sustained deception—she was not shocked as she would naturally have been had her powers of enduring mental suffering been put to a less intense strain.

‘So I must help to swindle him into an engagement; I never thought of that. I supposed you had told him everything, and he was willing to give the sum needed—to—’ she coloured painfully and hesitated—‘hush the matter up and so—*buy me*’—her voice broke off in a gasping sign of indignant revolt against the ideas her words called up.

‘He knows that all your own money is lost, but he does not know that—there is

anything whatever wrong—at the Bank ?' she went on presently, and was answered by a gesture of assent.

'And what if when he *does* know he refuses to keep an engagement into which he has been swindled ?'

'He will not refuse,' assented her father, 'at least it is not likely—anyhow, this is my last chance—let me try it, for God's sake !' and he writhed in his chair in an agony of imploring.

'Twenty thousand pounds,' spoke Christine, drearily, 'and all to buy a wife whom he knows to hate him with all her heart—if discovery comes before he is irrevocably tied to me legally, we are lost—he will speedily wash his hands of us.'

'And discovery may come any day, any hour, without an instant's warning—is it really so ? Oh, God pity us ! God pity us !' she said again, clasping her hands in agony and turning to her father, who made a last effort to regain some degree of courage.

‘Listen, Christine,’ he said, eagerly, ‘nobody knows what my difficulties are except Mr. Grahame and the cashier.’

‘You confided the whole truth to Mr. Grahame, and he refused to do anything for you?’ broke in Christine, eager to know whether after all help might not be found in that quarter.

The expression of her father’s face told her even ere he spoke how hopeless a repulse he had met with from this gentleman.

‘I went to London expressly to see him after I grew desperate,’ he owned in a choking voice, ‘I had the firmest faith that he would help me, and I threw myself on his mercy, all without avail. Yes, I know now what a hard man he is, I wish to heaven I had known it ere I stooped to apply to him. I tell you, Christine, I pleaded with him for Hugh’s sake and yours, I said everything I could think of likely to touch his heart; and last of all I went in despair to her ladyship and got *her* to plead with him, but he only grew the

more determined not to lift a finger to help me. Now you know how I fared there.'

Christine's lip curled in a miserable mocking smile. She understood how that pleading for poor Hugh's sake was likely to have affected Mr. Grahame in a way entirely opposite to that which was aimed at; and there was wormwood and gall in the knowledge that the brother of whom she was so fond and proud should be unconsciously humiliated in this manner.

'You can trust the Grahames to be silent I hope, papa? Hugh's honour is all he has in the world now, it must be saved at any sacrifice,' the girl said, startling her father by a sudden abandonment of her cold, constrained manner. The thought of Hugh had touched a cord of jealous tenderness in her nature, and her voice and look spoke eager resolution to watch over his interests and spare him all possible pain.

'Of course they will not betray me,' Mr. Brownlee responded, thinking, with a pang of

piercing remorse, how hard it was that his indulged only son reared in habits of luxury should without any fault of his own suddenly find himself without a shilling in the world beyond his scanty soldier's pay. 'As for Hugh, I'd give my life to keep the shadow of shame from falling on him,' he added, after a moment's silence, speaking huskily, and looking pitifully towards his daughter.

But if he was ever again to be comforted by her tenderness he was certainly not to be so at this moment. Relapsing into chilling self-restraint she brought him back to the point.

'So only one other person knows the truth and could inform against you—John Barr?' (her father's head clerk and the cashier in the banking office).

Mr. Brownlee bowed his head tiredly.

'And he would not do *me* any harm he could possibly help,' muttered Christine, unconsciously speaking her thoughts aloud. The reader will remember that I have for-

merly alluded to this young man as having had the presumption to fall in love with her, and even to confess his aspirations. All that happened years ago, and Mr. Brownlee and his family had almost forgotten it, though they had been greatly indignant at the time.

John Barr had become a useful fixture in the office, a patient drudge and faithful humble friend, in whom as years went on Mrs. Brownlee and the young people had come to place trust when needing any little service requiring business knowledge. So had *his* wild love-dream ended.

'If I had nothing to fear but the risk of *his* turning upon me I should sleep at nights,' Mr. Brownlee told her, and her own conviction was that nothing but dire necessity would make this trusted clerk speak out. She had now unravelled all the principal threads of the terrible complication of her position and that of her father, and beginning to be aware of a strange stupor creeping over

her mental faculties, she rose to leave the library.

At the door she turned and hesitatingly went back a step or two towards her father, who, frightened by her extreme pallor and the hazy look in her eyes, hurried towards her thinking she was about to faint.

She waved him off with a repellent gesture of her hand, and found voice to utter a few words.

‘I am very tired—I want time to think over what I ought to do, and bring my mind to it—give me an hour or two to myself—by-and-by I will come back to you.’

‘And meanwhile you will tell nothing of all this to your mother and Hugh?’ gasped Mr. Brownlee.

The question irritated her into a return of energy. ‘Of course not—they suppose that I am here writing letters for you—be sure that you keep up the deception—if they ask for me, say that I am busy in my own room. Oh, for heaven’s sake, do not let them find

out the truth ! If they ever do, I shall lose courage utterly—guard against this, papa ; your miserable looks are apt to make them suspicious.'

'Can I look anything but miserable when I do not know whether after all you are not going to fail me ?' groaned her father, looking so distraught that she could not but feel pity for him.

'*I will not fail you*—I have promised you that before. All I ask is a little time to myself—my head feels confused,' she said with careful gentleness ; and reiterating her promise to return she went away, painfully striving to recover something of her wonted look lest she should encounter any of the household.

As swiftly as she could she passed along the corridor, meeting no one. In crossing the hall to make her way upstairs, she was accosted by Janet, the head housemaid, a letter in her hand.

'I have been looking everywhere for you,

Miss Brownlee,' she told her with an unmistakeable air of special interest in what she had in hand ; ' Dr. Erskine's boy left this for you ;' and Janet smiled in spite of herself, then looked preternaturally solemn to make amends for her breach of etiquette.

'Are you feeling ill, Miss ?' she asked in kind concern, a moment later becoming aware of the young lady's strangely pale and suffering looks, but Christine did not hear her. Her hand had closed tightly over Gordon Erskine's first greeting, her heart was beating with alarming rapidity as she slowly made her way up the stairs, she had no perception of outward sounds or sights, but was for the moment living only in the inner world of her own thoughts and emotions.

Presently the graceful figure in its sweeping black draperies disappeared, and listening Janet heard a door close and a key turn.

Miss Brownlee was safe in her own room, free to open her love-letter and sob her heart's fill over it ; there at least she could lay

aside all restraint, and be her most miserable self.

And there alone, while the fair sunshine streamed into the luxuriously appointed chamber, and the songs of the birds sounded cheerily in the new budded trees which dotted the lawn beneath her open windows, she looked her future in the face and suffered the agonies of many cruel deaths.

CHAPTER III.

TRAPPED.

'*At last at last !*' muttered Mr. Brownlee, heaving a mighty sigh of relieved suspense as he heard the door-handle turn and saw his daughter appear on the threshold.

He had passed two terrible hours since she had left him. Again and again his mind had travelled the distracting round of his miseries, scarce a glimmering ray of hope penetrating the awful gloom of his spirit.

'*I will not fail you,*' Christine had indeed said ; but had she fully weighed the cost of saving him? Would she, who had been wont to annoy him by her scrupulousness and stand so obstinately upon punctilios

of honour, be able, even although she were willing, to carry out the course of deception her co-operation with him would make incumbent?

And loving Gordon Erskine passionately, as she evidently did at this moment, what-ever change years might bring, what might not *his* influence over her effect, supposing that he refused to be dismissed quietly and persisted in his claims to her hand?

Nor, though he tried hard to lessen his pangs of remorse by telling himself that for her sake it was well she should be driven by the force of circumstances to abandon her romantic love-dreams, and, by making a brilliant marriage of convenience, save herself from implication in the sadly-altered worldly fortunes of her family, could he overcome a consciousness of infamy in his conduct towards her.

So there was mingled shame and fear in the expression of the haggard face which turned to her as she entered, even though

the muttered '*at last*' caught by her quick ear, told, with its accompanying sigh, what the torture of waiting had been. She came towards him slowly, saying in a strange cynical tone as she stopped by his chair :

'Have I been long away, papa ? I did not know that I had. Minutes and hours are all much the same to me to-day ; the world seems to have got off its axis, and the sun to have gone down never to rise any more ; and yet, after all, it is only Christine Brownlee's life that is spoiled—hers, and another worth a thousand times more—that is all.'

Mr. Brownlee stared at her in pained wonderment, knowing not how to answer, and gradually, as he became conscious of a transformation in her outer self, his most tormenting doubts and terrors faded even before the next words gave him positive assurance that he had underrated her powers of endurance and action. She had managed to do away with all traces of tears. She

seemed to have grown taller all of a sudden, her eyes shone, and her cheeks were becomingly flushed.

If feverish excitement was the cause of this, at least none but a close observer would be likely to find it out. She had smoothed her disordered hair and changed her morning dress for an elegant carriage costume ; in short, she had determinedly entered into the spirit of her new *rôle*, ruthlessly sacrificing her own inclinations to its exigencies.

‘I have been studying my part, papa. Now I know it perfectly, and am ready to play it. You must help me to the best of your ability—though, of course, you know that,’ and Christine smiled—oh, such a hard, sarcastic smile ! Tears would have been less pitiful, her father thought.

Still he breathed freer than he had been able to do for long, as he saw her sit down in a quiet, business-like way at the table by which he himself was seated, and, thoughtfully leaning her chin on her clasped hands, her

elbows planted firmly, prepare to discuss the steps now necessary.

‘Tell me what ought to be done, Christine,’ he said in a shaking voice, fixing appealing eyes on her. The strain upon his nervous system had been so intense and so long-continued that at last its effects were beginning to be visible. She must bear the chief weight of the burden henceforth, or he would sink under it helplessly, she told herself as she looked at him narrowly. That conviction was, in her present mood of grim resolution, but a spur to definite action, and she made haste to unfold the scheme she had planned while enduring unutterable mental anguish in the solitude of her own chamber.

‘I have done speaking tragically, papa,’ she said, with a shrug of would-be cynical impatience at her own previous failure to maintain a stoic-like demeanour ; ‘it serves no practical purpose. Let us have no more scenes, but do our best to behave like other people, whatever we may be feeling.’

'Yes, yes,' put in her father eagerly, drawing another of his expressive sighs of relief; 'you are right; you were always sensible and clever, Christine.'

'I am going to need all my sense and cleverness now, that is very clear,' she commented, a dreary smile flickering over her beautiful face; then she ran on speaking fast, as if she was in a hurry to get through her communications: 'I have written and sent off a note to Gordon Erskine'—spite of all her resolution she felt a great choking lump rise in her throat as she spoke that beloved name, and thought of the misery she was about to cause him—'telling him—telling him——'

Her voice failed her utterly, but only for an instant or two. Determinedly she went on: 'Telling him I scarcely know what; some lies, of course; begging him not to seek an interview with me. He has been called away from Langtoun this morning, and will not be back till late, so I have a

respite for to-day at least, and that is something,' and again that weird, unhappy smile took the place of the burst of tears in which most women would, if experiencing her feelings, have indulged themselves.

'As for Sir Robert Urquhart,' she proceeded, a frown darkening her brow, and her eyes sternly fixed on the ground, 'I want you to write to him at once; time is precious; we cannot afford to lose an hour. Tell him I will——'

The task of self-restraint was beyond her powers. She turned suddenly upon her father like a wild creature brought to bay, her cheeks flamed, her glance shot lightnings of disdain and hatred. 'Tell him what hateful lies you will; it is nothing to me; I am here waiting his pleasure; he can come and take me when he likes; but let him be sure of this, I will curse him in my heart every hour that I live; I will——'

'Christine! Christine!' pleaded her father, in helpless concern at this unlooked-for out-

burst; and at the sound of his voice poor Christine remembered her vows of unsparing self-sacrifice, and choked down the rising tide of wrathful feeling which had threatened to find itself a vent in fierce invective.

Presently she resumed, in quite an opposite tone, low, patient, languid, 'Say that I will marry him, but ask him to stay away one day more—to-morrow—Hugh goes off to-morrow night, and it will be easier for me to break this news to him by letter; Hugh detests him, and knows that I do the same; he knows, too, that I cannot marry anybody but Gordon Erskine without being guilty of a shameful breach of faith. He will be very angry and amazed when he finds out what I am going to do; all for the love of money and a title, as it will appear to him. It is absolutely necessary that he should be got out of the way first, otherwise he will come into collision with——Sir Robert'—she could not for the life of her speak his name without a shuddering pause—

‘and you know how dangerous that would be.’

Mr. Brownlee struck in with eager assurances that Sir Robert would wait as she desired, that it was undoubtedly best Hugh should learn this news by letter ; but she presently stopped him with an impatient gesture.

‘That is settled then. Now what must be done at once is to tell mamma and Hugh part of the truth.’

‘What must I tell them ?’ asked her father, regarding her helplessly. The idea was full of terror to him, she saw from his expression.

‘Only enough to make them fancy they understand my motives for throwing love to the winds and making a secure establishment of myself in life,’ the tone of languor gave place to one of bitter sarcasm as she said that—‘own that you have had severe money losses, that we shall all be obliged to fall in to economical habits.’

‘Which is just what we dare not do openly. Good God, Christine ! you know how

incumbent it is on us to keep up appearances,' he sighed nervously, twisting and untwisting his trembling hands.

'Of course you would warn them not to breathe the matter in case of its spread hurting you in the way of business ; a single hint would be enough, and it would be absolutely cruel to give them no preparation for the complete change in our way of living which must come some day before long. *Our* way of living, did I say ?' she hastened to correct herself with an unhappy shrug, 'I shall be dwelling apart in mighty state as the mistress of Westerwood, if Sir Robert falls into the snare set for him, as I am bound to hope he will. The change will not affect happy *me*.'

The sound of her own ironical words sent a chill to her heart. With an irrepressible shudder she dropped her face between her hands and abandoned herself to her miserable thoughts.

Penetrated by remorse at the sight, Mr.

Brownlee sat watching her in shame-stricken silence. There was a long pause, then suddenly the booming of the great gong in the hall broke the stillness, summoning the family to luncheon according to daily wont; and, reminded by its sonorous voice of the urgent need of self-possession, the two occupants of the library made attempts to resume their accustomed demeanour.

‘Tell them what you think best, Christine—take the opportunity at luncheon when you are alone,’ Mr. Brownlee said in a nervous hurry; ‘I need not go into the dining-room, you can send me a tray in here and say that I am busy.’

So this task was also to devolve upon her. Well, she would probably get through it more smoothly than her father in his present shaken state would be likely to do.

‘After you have eaten something you must write to Sir Robert and send your note away at once—I am in terror lest he should come here before Hugh is out of the

way,' Christine told him after a moment's thought.

He promised to do as she recommended; and she rose to go, hearing with a sinking heart the last reverberation of the gong die away. At the door she turned, asking anxiously, a pathetically careworn look sharpening her features,

'Have I thought of everything—is there nothing else I can do?'

She did not look loving or gentle, but simply solicitous for the success of the hated intrigue into which she had been forced. Prompted by a cruel pang of jealous love, her father went up to her and held out his hand.

'You have sacrificed yourself to save us all—now you will hate me as the cause of your suffering—oh, Christine! do not turn against me in your heart—forgive me. You will never know what I have suffered, how bitter it was to bring myself to tell you everything—and yet I had nobody else to turn to—you were my only hope of salvation, tell me

for the sake of the love I have borne you ever since you were a little babe in my arms that you will not *hate* me.'

There was intense anguish visibly written on every lineament of his face, his voice quivered, and his outstretched hand shook like an aspen leaf, yet no more tender emotion than a dull pity woke up in his daughter's heart.

'What is past is past,' she said gloomily, letting her hand rest passively in his; 'I will never reproach you with it—I shall never hate you—it cannot be that I shall be driven to that—only'—the burst of genuine feeling came now—'nothing is so impossible as that I should sacrifice myself and the man I love a thousand times better than myself and yet be sweet and dutiful and tender like other women who are happy and carry no miserable secrets about with them—you must not expect impossibilities from me.'

A heavy sigh was the only response he made her, then there was a tap at the library

door, and father and daughter drew apart hastily.

Hugh had come to remind them of the waiting luncheon, but Christine stopped him on the threshold and intimating in the most indifferent voice she could command that their father preferred to lunch alone, as he was still busy with his letters, withdrew in his company.

Greatly had she dreaded the moment when she should be forced to confront her unsuspecting mother and brother, so vast was the relief she experienced in hearing that a couple of visitors had dropped in and had been invited to stay for luncheon.

Mrs. Drew and Aggie, arriving at the hall-door just after the meal had been put upon the table, had come as angels in disguise, according to Christine's way of looking upon their advent—Hugh's was of an entirely different nature, and his inhospitable disturbance of spirit made him quite unobservant of any change in his sister's air.

By the time they had joined Mrs. Brownlee and the strangers at the luncheon table she had quite recovered her wonted self-possession, and it did not occur to any of the party that the fair and graceful young lady whose soul seemed for the moment entirely given to hospitable duties and who performed them so faultlessly as to win even uncongenial Mrs. Drew's admiration, was with infinite painstaking acting a part, while her real self suffered cruelly.

The minister's wife and daughter had brought with them stores of long accumulated gossip, to which Mrs. Brownlee, at least, was very well pleased to listen after the dearth of Langtoun news endured in her long exile; the trio did the most part of the talking, but when appealed to, Christine was always ready to seize the cue, and respond with propriety—Hugh it was, who, with much less solid grounds for disquietude, seemed *distrain* and melancholy to a degree which moved the pity of worthy Mrs. Drew, under

whose rough and vulgar exterior much genuine warm-heartedness lay hidden, to come to the surface only upon rare occasions.

The details of the missing will had leaked out during the course of Mr. Brownlee's fruitless efforts to recover it; and, as will be readily believed, the matter had been discussed from every imaginable point of view by the inhabitants of the sleepy old town, where such sources of excitement were sadly scarce.

The conclusion generally arrived at, and understood to be that accepted by the disappointed Brownlee family themselves, was that the original draft found in the desk where the deceased had shortly before his death declared that his duly attested last will lay, had been preserved by him in mistake for the valid deed, unwittingly destroyed by his own hands.

Sir Robert Urquhart's subsequent proceeding to enter into undisputed possession of Boghall and the smaller property willed

respectively to Christine and Hugh Brownlee had been a no less fertile subject for discussion, and the public interest rose to no little height when it became evident that the rival parties (Mr. Brownlee being considered as the representative of his children) were, to all outward appearance, falling into terms of friendly intimacy, although they had held apart throughout years in which their interests had been in merely prospective collision.

Generally speaking, people of the better class, amongst whom the most interested spectators of this phenomenon were to be found, lived with a healthful slowness in Langtoun—they had ample leisure for the consideration of their neighbours' affairs, and the ladies in particular threw themselves into this study with hearty good will.

An ingenious couple of them, putting their heads together on the occasion of a tea-party at the Manse, found out an explanation of the mystery.

Sir Robert Urquhart wanted a wife, and

alterations suggestive of the advent of a mistress had lately been effected 'at Westwood. Christine Brownlee was an acknowledged beauty, and on her mother's side was of good blood. She was almost bound in virtue of these advantages to look for a husband in a higher sphere than that to which her father belonged, and what more probable than the existence of an agreement that she should barter her youth and charms for the glories of a title and handsome settlements such as Sir Robert could offer her.

The whisper circulated briskly as the teacups were emptied and refilled; by the joint efforts of memory and imagination many corroborative evidences of the baronet's admiration and of the young lady's ambition were gradually brought forward. When the company broke up at the close of the evening's entertainment, the engagement had imperceptibly passed out of the realms of probability into those of positive assertion; and of the outside multitude who

became the next recipients of the agreeably tickling news comparatively few paused to demand demonstration of its truth.

One gentleman certainly did raise his voice in very strong and scornful protest when Mrs. Drew, who thought Miss Brownlee had in his case transgressed the bounds of excusable flirtation, carried to his ears, to which but little gossip penetrated, the report already widely current. That gentleman was Dr. Erskine.

His informant duly rebuked with a sternness which he was not wont to show to women, he was presently on the road for Woodend, meaning to warn Mr. Brownlee of the need to check this scandalous report ; but ere he had gone halfway other thoughts prevailed, and he bent his steps homeward, a trustful smile dispelling the clouds from his forehead, and a warmth of assured happiness kindling at his heart.

Christine would be home in a week or two ; she would reward his faithful waiting

by instantly giving him an open right to defend her against any such vile calumny ; she would share his name and his home very soon—had not the thoughtful, kind messages conveyed to him through her brother's friendly letters all tended to keep up this hope ? Meanwhile it was incumbent on him to keep his promise of avoiding all occasion of quarrelling with her father.

Mrs. Drew, who, with the promptness of interference natural to her, had rushed at the young doctor to give him a friendly warning, had been greatly incensed by his manner of receiving it. She had been loud in declaring that no mere worldly considerations could make it excusable on Mr. and Mrs. Brownlee's part to give their daughter in marriage to a man of such evil character as Sir Robert Urquhart ; and she had really been concerned at the prospect of seeing a union so unnatural carried out ; but when Dr. Erskine had with all imaginable positiveness maintained that there was not a word

of truth in the story she had carried to him, nay, had asserted the absolute impossibility of any such match being even for a moment taken into consideration, either by the young lady or her relatives, Mrs. Drew, albeit not a spiteful woman, had been driven to cherish a secret longing that events would prove her to have been in the right, and bring shame and confusion of face to the over-confident young man.

Now to-day the result of the worthy lady's study of Mr. Brownlee's couple of young people was a confirmation of her previous suspicions. The captain, who was notoriously careless about money matters, and was of an honest, open nature, above suspicion of mercenary calculations, was ill at ease in the prospect of seeing his sister sacrificed on the altar of ambition, personal or family—the young lady herself, cool enough in such an agitating position to be carving chickens and contributing small talk with her old air of graceful ability and absorption in

the employment of the moment, was clearly designed by Providence for translation to a higher social sphere where heads were more in request than hearts.

Mrs. Drew, her own and her daughter's budget of gossip duly delivered, naturally expected to be rewarded by having a return budget in the shape of family news to carry away with her. How else was enlivening social intercourse to be maintained at the Manse tea-parties, where cards were tabooed as a worldly amusement of too pronounced a kind, and music was by the generality of the company looked upon merely as a harmless occupation for the juveniles, who without it might seriously interfere with the free interchange of gossip which formed the staple entertainment of their seniors!

But on this occasion the indefatigable forager of food for the craving Langtoun curiosity was doomed to be disappointed. Private signals from Christine warned her mother and brother to be discreet when

their own affairs were threatened with investigation, and she parried the questions addressed to herself with an adroitness impossible to be outdone. Several times during the course of luncheon was the subject of Will Urquhart's death approached with all due preliminaries of sighs and head-shakes by the minister's lady, who was uneasily conscious of its being her duty to learn the full details, and be prepared with an exhaustive obituary notice for the benefit of the parish at large; but even on this matter, so undeniably within her province as virtual assistant-keeper of the records of births, deaths and marriages, she found little information forthcoming.

Mrs. Brownlee had recourse to her pocket-handkerchief and her smelling-bottle; Christine answered curtly in a low voice of stern self-repression, and Hugh took upon himself to turn the conversation with startling abruptness whenever Mrs. Drew recurred to their late loss, thus depriving

the company of the orthodox spiritual consolation which, according to her wont on all such sad occasions, she was about to bestow liberally.

As she walked off with Aggie down the long avenue, trimly kept and gay with flowering shrubs and spring flowers in its borders, the sunshine flickering through the tender green of the trees overhead, the whole scene suggestive of peace and prosperity, she criticised the ways and doings of her late entertainers with no little vigour, the secret of her more than wonted severity of judgment being, as experienced Aggie easily divined, the fact that Miss Brownlee had on this as on many previous occasions proved herself more than a match for her.

Sonsie Aggie, arrayed in her new spring finery in honour of the round of calls her mother and she were making that day, was too well satisfied with the world and with herself to be easily irritated, or she would have been dragged into a quarrel through

taking up the cudgels in defence of Christine, for whom she felt a great deal of admiration and liking, though at the same time she stood a little in awe of her.

Life was opening up pleasantly to the eyes of the sedate young damsel. The bashful clerical lover whom she had professed to detest in the old days had little by little risen in her good graces until it was impossible for him to rise any higher in them, and a proposal of marriage had been listened to with demure meekness ; so it had become an understood thing that as soon as the Manse addition and repairs were completed—chiefly through Lady Jean Grahame's influence this triumph of Mrs. Drew's life had at last been inaugurated—there would be a wedding, celebrated with all due cheer, in the minister's dwelling.

'If people act up to their lights, that is all we have a right to ask of them,' remarked Miss Drew, with a composure born of personal happiness. Her husband-to-be

prided himself on holding very liberal views on theological matters, and she was already beginning to echo his opinions with the parrot-like imitativeness of the average woman in love.

Aggie might be an embryo mistress of a manse and the better half of a parish minister, but all the same she was only her Aggie, a raw and inexperienced girl of eighteen and a half, and it was out of the question to suppose that on any point of morals she could judge more correctly than her mother.

So the worthy lady gave her flower-bedecked best bonnet an irate toss, which almost upset its equilibrium, and flung out a contemptuous retort as the Woodend gates clanged to after them.

'*Lights* indeed! I wonder to hear you, Aggie; worldly-minded people, like them, caring for nothing but money, and position, and style, with utterly unregenerate hearts, that cannot rise above the ordinary human affections—have no lights to act up to—no

lights to act up to,' repeated the lady, with energy.

'Then it is absurd to sit in judgment upon them, mamma,' rejoined Aggie, with a little laugh of imperturbable good-humour ; which logical conclusion ended their discussion, Mrs. Dawson and two of her daughters just then crossing their path, and a confusion of friendly handshakings and greetings resulting.

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